



by Mo Xiang

Advent of the Archmage



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Advent of the Archmage

– Descent of the God of Magic –

- Volume 2 -

**-Author-
Mo Xiang**

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Chapter 28

Leaving for a New Beginning

It was finally daybreak.

As the Dark Elf Army slowly retreated, Link too sighed, but in relief. The effect of Magical Murmurs was about to wear out. He could already feel the exhaustion seeping into his bones.

He would face three months in the weakened state of Ailing Mana, leaving him no choice but to seriously contemplate his course of action during that time.

He had been too noticeable last night. There was no way the Dark Elves would let him go for what he'd done. He would probably face countless assassinations from the Death Hand throughout those three months.

Gladstone City was very close to the Black Forest. The further he was from the city, the safer he'd be.

Throwing a glance at Annie Abel, Link rejoiced. Not only had he rescued Gladstone City, he had saved the future Legendary Assassin, truly changing the fate of the Firuman Continent.

Annie walked up to him. Link smiled and nodded to her. Then, as she looked on in shock, he leapt off the city walls and cast a Vector Resistance Field once more.

Under the Spell's rebounded effect, Link fell towards one of the small alleys of Gladstone City. He still wore the effects of the Cat's Agility and so he landed lightly.

He had completed his mission and gotten what he wanted. Each second he spent in Gladstone meant more danger. There was no need for goodbyes.

Celine was already waiting for him in the alley.

"Let's leave," Link said as he smiled at her. They had agreed on this beforehand.

Celine nodded. They walked through the alley for a while before turning onto a small path. When they had sneaked out of the city and reached far beyond the sight of anyone else, Celine took on her demon form. She brought Link close in preparation for the long-distance flight they would undertake. Link did his best to stay calm as the position was quite dangerous. Shaking out her wings, Celine soared into the skies.

Gladstone still didn't know of Link's disappearance. They were still searching for the powerful Magician who had rescued the city. Of course, there was nothing to be found.

Tales of the Magician spread throughout Gladstone.

Some said he was a messenger of the God of Light. Others said that he was a prodigy of magic. While yet others said that he was the master of fire.

All of these were pure speculation. The truth was long buried by the sands of time.

All the people knew was that the Magician had come from the Magic Academy of Flemmings. And so, in the Flower Gardens of the rebuilt Magic Academy stood a large and tall statue.

The statue was that of a young man, his facial features crafted vaguely. Holding a magic staff and wearing a gray robe, he stared into the distance. The statue was called: The Guardian.

A simple line was annotated below: He saved Gladstone.

Of course, this was all in the far future.

When Celine flew past the boundary of Gladstone, Link saw two new notifications appear on his interface.

The first notification read:

Mission Completed: Save Gladstone

Game Player receivers 100 Omni Points.

That was great!

The second notification was:

The effect of Magical Murmurs has worn out. Game player will be in the weakened state of Ailing Mana. All stats will be reduced by 90% for three months.

That was terrible. Link sighed to himself and checked his current condition.

Link Morani (Noble)

Level-4 Normal Magician

Mana Recovery Speed 0.92

Maximum Mana 24.1

Weapon: Fire Crystal Staff

Supreme Magical Skills: None

Condition: Weakened state of Ailing Mana.

His Mana Recovery Speed and Maximum Mana had both reverted to that of the average Magician's Apprentice; it would stay that way for three months! This sucked.

Though he was labeled as a Level-4 Magician, it was only in name, and largely due to the Level-4 Flame Blast he had cast earlier. The skill level of a Magician on the Firuman Continent was equivalent to the highest level of magic they could cast.

Truth be told, Link only had some elementary knowledge of magic theory. He had a long way to go before he could truly become a great Archmage!

"Are you sure that you want to go to the East Cove Magic Academy?" Celine asked.

"Yes," Link nodded.

He'd foraged a lot of basic magic books from the Flemmings Magic Academy's library. He should be able to read and digest them quickly. Once he learned enough of magic's basic foundations, he would apply for enrollment. He probably wouldn't lag behind then.

But there was another important reason for him to go to the East Cove Magic Academy.

In the game, a terrible incident had occurred within less than half a year after the Change of the Bloody Moon—the Demon Tarlvess escaped from his three-century-long imprisonment at the East Cove Magic Academy.

Tarlvess was a true demon of the Deeps, and his power was almost Legendary. The only reason he was captured was because a human prodigy in magic three centuries ago by the name of Bryant overpowered him.

Bryant had managed to attain Legendary status despite the low density of Mana at his time and age. His battle with Tarlvess had been fierce and long. It lasted two days and two nights; the aftermath of their battle formed a deep valley where the East Cove Magic Academy now stood.

Now, however, the mighty Mage had long since passed away. Though weakened by the magical barriers Bryant had cast three hundred years ago, Tarlvess still had the formidable strength of a Level-8 Demon.

Blood flowed from the academy in rivers at the cost of his escape. The dean, a Level-7 Master Magician had paid the price of his soul to chase Tarlvess off with the Level-8 Spell, Demon Cage. Even so, less than half of the academy's Magicians survived and the valley was leveled flat. This was the most significant event since the Change of the Bloody Moon. It had been called the Mourning of Magic.

The two successive blows had crippled the Norton Kingdom. They met defeat in each subsequent battle with the Kingdom of Pralync. In just three years, the once mighty kingdom, now hanging on by the skin of its teeth, had no choice but to move its center of power. Its monarchy relocated south to take refuge with the Free Trade Confederation. However, the assassination of King Leon by the fallen Annie Abel in several years' time had caused the complete collapse of the Norton Kingdom. And so, the weak Freedom Confederation of the South, which had been protected by the Norton Kingdom's troops before that, had no choice but to directly confront the Dark Elf forces.

The future of the human race had seemed dark indeed.

Considering the behavior of the game server so far, any missions regarding the demon, Tarlvess, would be truly important. He would be able to earn many Omni Points from them.

"Fine. I really don't understand you though," Celine responded.

Despite that, Celine still carried Link as she flew towards the North.

"The dean of East Cove Magic Academy, Earl Anthony, is a Level-7 Master Magician," she began to explain, "There are powerful Rune Barriers around the academy. Even the Girvent Forest around the academy is under the surveillance of their watchtower; it's extremely sensitive to dark magic. It'll be very hard to for me to hide myself there, so I can only send you to the border of the forest."

This came as a surprise to Link. He had thought that Celine would be able to enter the academy with him. If that was so, then he and Celine would have to part ways.

Feeling the soft, warm body behind him, Link stayed silent, full of reluctance.

Celine sensed it and said laughingly, "I would have to leave even without the Rune Barriers. As you know, since I showed my true form, my father's lackeys will be after me again. I need to shake them off first."

"Be careful," Link stirred. Yes, this wasn't the time for romancing. Celine was in constant danger. He needed to get stronger as fast as he could!

"Don't worry. I'm used to it. Those hounds are all idiots," Celine giggled.

They continued to chat as they traveled. Celine flew very quickly. Half an hour later, a vast expanse of rubber trees appeared beneath them. It was the Girvent Forest, also praised as the Courtyard of the Gods.

Lush green trees and shrubs, dappled sunlight, birdsongs and the aroma of flowers astonished their senses. A wide path stretched out in a straight line through the forest, some clearings appearing beside it every now and then. Those were forest ranches. Further in, at the middle of the forest, there was a bustling small town—the town of River Cove. A clear stream ran through the middle of it.

From up in the sky, Link's heart was filled with joy, yet tinged with regret by the picturesque scene.

In the lore, the Dark Elves had used a God-level item to conquer the South. When the Dark Elves reached Girvent Forest, the East Cove Magic Academy, which had just been rebuilt, had been forced to use powerful magic barriers to stop the Dark Elf Army from

advancing. Between the two forces, the beautiful Girvent Forest had been reduced to ashes.

This time, Gladstone was saved, and Annie lived. Would history change because of that? Link had no idea. But he vaguely sensed that all he had changed were some minor details—the main flow of history was not that simple.

They soon reached the western entrance of the forest where Celine landed. "I'll drop you off here."

"Many thanks," Link smiled. He was reluctant to part with her, but he knew that in order to walk with the Demon Princess in the future, he had first to catch up to her footsteps.

Celine, too, was sentimental. In her heart, she saw Link as a true friend and she was worried considering that he was now in a weakened state of magic.

She gritted her teeth and pulled three feathers from her wings. She quivered in pain as she wrenched them off.

She passed the soft feathers to Link. "Take these with you. Burn one when you're in danger, and I will come to save you."

Link took the pitch-black feathers from her. Information popped up on the game interface.

Feathers of the Demon Princess Celine Flandre

Quality: Epic

Effect: Summons the Demon Princess to your aid when burned.

(Note: A token of friendship.)

Link carefully hugged the feathers to his chest, making Celine blush a little.

"I'll remember it," He said.

Celine took out a pendant of mystic silver. "A storage pendant. Most of the magic books from Gladstone are in there. Your New Moon Wand, and Fire Crystal Staff will need to

be hidden—you can put them in here."

Dimensional storage gear was very expensive. Such a pendant probably cost more than 2000 gold pieces, but Link needed it, and the books inside it, desperately. He had been rushing around Gladstone and didn't really have time to consider them, but the magic books were especially important to him now. It came as a pleasant surprise that Celine had prepared all this for him.

"You... I'll take it." Link wasn't coy. The greatest favors needed no thanks.

Celine watched as Link put on the pendant. Suddenly, she walked up and planted a kiss on his forehead before taking a few steps back. Her smooth, white face flushed. "My friend, I'll leave now."

Link felt the tingling on his forehead. In a daze, he nodded. By the time he came to, Celine had already left.

It was as if a piece of his heart had gone with her. He touched the pendant that lay on his chest. It felt like Celine was still with him. Strangely comforted by it, he stepped onto the forest path.

The wide path in the forest was also known as the King's Lane. It led Northeast, passing through River Cove Town in the middle of Girvent Forest, past East Cove Magic Academy, and finally to the capital of the Norton Kingdom, Springs City.

It was the only path leading from the South to the capital.

"Springs City must be a mess right now," Link sighed.

In the game, Norton Kingdom had crumbled not just due to the invasions but also because of internal squabbles. The capital city was in chaos mainly due to the struggle of power between King Leon and his younger brother, the Iron Duke.

The chaos in the capital city had spread throughout the land. Take Girvent Forest, for example—all was peaceful and beautiful. But it was just a façade for the danger that lay within.

Link met that danger within 12 miles of setting foot on the King's Lane.

A skinny old horse had collapsed by the roadside, its neck slit by a knife. The blood

hadn't coagulated yet, so it had probably died not long ago.

Listening carefully, Link could hear some noises coming from within the trees by the road. It sounded like someone was battling.

Just then, the game interface shifted and a new notification appeared.

Mission Activated: Aid and Rescue

Mission Details: Save the master of the old horse.

Mission Reward: 5 Omni Points.

A mission!

Letting his curiosity get the best of him, Link took the mission without another thought. Then, cloaking himself in the Spell of Silence, he traced the sounds to their origins, deep into the forest.

Chapter 29

The Undying Protagonist of Legend

Within two to three minutes, Link saw the battlegrounds through the sparse cover of the rubber trees.

Link's heart raced at the scene before him.

Three bandits, wearing masks of blood-red fabric, were attacking a young kid of around seventeen or eighteen years of age. He had a face of indescribable beauty.

It was fine if someone was prettier than average, but this kid's features were far beyond that. He had a head of cloud-gray hair, eyes of a deep, dark green hue and near-perfect facial features. He was worthy of any praise in that regard.

A name popped up on the game interface before Link.

The half-elf Eliard!

Eliard: A Legendary character, born of a human and a High Elf, with unfathomable magical talent.

The first twenty years of the game had been a time when darkness had crept over the world. But it had also been the time during which the half-elf had grown to reach the Legendary Pinnacle.

If one were to speak about the World of Firuman without its game players, and only of the native NPCs, Eliard was definitely the typical undying protagonist!

Of course, at this moment, the prodigy's journey had not yet begun. Now, he was just a normal kid. Though somewhat skilled in fighting solo, he was still in pretty bad shape.

Facing three normal bandits with skills equal to that of the average street thug, Eliard managed to duck and evade here and there, narrowly missing death several times. He bled from multiple cuts on his body, and he looked as if he would fall at any moment.

Link had his mission to complete. Seeing that Eliard was about to be captured, he attacked.

There were just a few bandits. Link cast a Fireball at each of them from behind the tree without even showing his face.

Though his magic was weak, and despite the spells being cast without a wand, the Fireballs still possessed a certain amount of strength. Link used his old trick—a fireball exploded in each of the three bandits' ears.

Bang! Bang! Bang! One of the bandits was knocked out by the blast, leaving the other two stumbling about like drunken men.

Eliard was quick and nimble and knew some martial arts, but he was not a bloodthirsty fellow. At this, he landed a karate chop on each of the bandits' necks, knocking them out for good.

Then he looked in the direction in which Link stood. Wearing a hint of wariness, he called out, "Mr. Magician, thank you for your help."

He was too handsome, too beautiful. Because of his mixed parentage, Eliard had been left at an orphanage and grew up facing a lot of deception. Many harbored evil thoughts due to his exceptional looks. He had almost been sold to the nobles as an escort. The three bandits' aim had been obvious—they wanted to capture and sell him. His past experiences made him wary of strangers' help.

The Magician had appeared at a crucial moment, just as he was about to be captured by the bandits. There was something strange about that.

Perhaps he was being overly suspicious, but it was that same suspicion which had allowed him to survive up until now.

Link, not knowing what thoughts ran through Eliard's head, walked out from behind the tree and smiled at him. "It's nothing, just a simple gesture. I'm Link. May I know your name?"

Eliard hesitated, but the Magician had saved him, after all, so he gave his real name. "My name is Eliard."

Link smiled. He remembered a randomly generated, secret mission he had once heard

of.

People on the game forum said that a young, unbelievably powerful NPC Magician appeared around the East Cove Magic Academy. The NPC appeared at random, issuing missions which allowed game players to collect all sorts of alchemy ingredients and materials. The missions weren't difficult but they were somewhat tedious. Game players received Epic Magic Crystals from the NPC after completing the final part of the mission.

In the game, items of Fine and Superior Quality were common, but Epic items were precious. Even in the next 20 years, when the world's Mana density was much higher, it was still quite an accomplishment for a game player to be able to collect a full set of Epic quality gear.

The NPC Magician was Eliard. All those who had completed the secret mission said that the half-elf was a mild, generous fellow who paid his debts in kind. Link knew that the stories probably rang true from Eliard's clear eyes and gentle features.

Making friends with a talented, future Legendary character was probably a good thing. But Eliard looked wary. Link would probably need a few tricks to build rapport with him.

"Good. I'll remember it. I should leave too, now that you're safe." Link gave Eliard a Magician's salute, then turned to leave.

He believed that Eliard would stop him. Even if he didn't, they would meet again at the East Cove Magic Academy. After all, Eliard was also bound for the school to study magic.

"Wait," Eliard did indeed stop him, "Mr. Link, are you a Magician of the East Cove Magic Academy?"

Link stopped and shook his head. "Not yet. I am on my way there to study magic."

"You..." Eliard's dark green eyes swept up and down Link's figure. What he saw was a pair of dull eyes (a manifestation of Ailing Magic), a normal gray robe and just a faint tinge of Mana around him. The Magician was probably just a normal Magician's Apprentice.

As far as he knew, the East Cove Magic Academy was extremely strict in its enrollment

requirements. After all, the academy was the gathering place of the elite figures within the Norton Kingdom. It took in only prodigies or fully-fledged Magicians.

This Link knew some magic, but his talent was weak. He would probably be turned down at the door.

"What? Is something wrong?" Link asked with a smile.

"Sir, I have heard that the East Cove Magic Academy is very strict in its selection of applicants. I am afraid that you may not make it," Eliard said carefully, doing his best to avoid hurting Link's pride with his words. He no longer held any suspicion of Link.

Link understood what Eliard was saying. A wry smile crossed his lips. With just one glance, the effect of Ailing Magic allowed others to tell that he had not been blessed with magical talent.

"I brought some magic books with me. I'll try to enroll at the academy first. If I don't make it, I'll self-study for a while and try again when I improve." Link's smile was sunny and cheerful.

Eliard felt pity at this. In his eyes, Link was the type of person who, despite having his heart set on magic, had not been blessed with talent.

There were many such people in the Kingdom. But there was a stark difference between ideals and reality. Most of them studied magic with a passion, but still ended up wasting their youth.

Eliard pondered it, then said, "I'm planning to go to the East Cove Magic Academy too. Why don't we go together?"

The young Magician's Apprentice had saved his life. He owed Link a huge favor.

I'll be able to help him with his magic even if I can't help him get into the academy, Eliard thought.

As for himself, he was confident that he'd be able to enter the East Cove Magic Academy thanks to his incomparable magical talent. All the Magicians who had seen him said so, and he himself could sense it.

Link's heart leaped for joy. It was all going as he'd planned. He'd managed to get close

to Eliard, a halo of undying luck shone upon him. Following Eliard was definitely the right choice.

A notification appeared on the interface.

Mission completed.

Game player receives 5 Omni Points.

Subsequent mission activated.

Mission: Enrollment

Mission Details:

Enroll and study magic at the East Cove Magic Academy.

Truly master a Level-0 Spell.

Mission Reward: 5 Omni Points.

Wonderful. Link accepted the mission with a smirk.

Chapter 30

His First Level-0 Spell (1)

The two of them traveled together and they both intended to enroll in the East Cove Magic Academy.

The bandits had left multiple cuts on Eliard's body, but they were just about as skilled as common street thugs. The wounds weren't deep and had stopped bleeding even without any first aid.

After wrapping the wounds, Eliard changed into a fresh set of clothing taken from the bundle that had fallen off the old horse. He looked much better after that.

"Here. It's just a normal healing tonic, but your wounds will heal faster if you drink it," Link said as he took out a bottle. He'd found it in the Alchemy Tower of the magic academy in Gladstone and only had two of them.

Eliard wavered. He'd only known Link for a short while and still wasn't at ease with drinking something from someone he had just met.

He watched Link earnestly. Seeing the Magician's open and composed demeanor, he relaxed somewhat. It was an act of kindness after all, and he wasn't one to turn it down just like that. He accepted the bottle from Link and took a small sip. After sensing that all was well, he drank it all down.

"Thank you." Eliard felt a comfortable warmth suffuse his stomach. Instantly, he knew that it hadn't been tampered with, and was in fact, most likely a potion of superior quality.

"No problem," Link answered cheerfully, "Let's go."

The East Cove Magic Academy stood on the northeast side of Girvent Forest. They had entered from the forest's western entrance, which meant that they would have to travel through more than half of the Girvent Forest.

Luckily, it wasn't that large, only about 30 to 40 miles wide. Also, the King's Lane had

been paved smoothly, making their journey much easier.

They chatted as they walked.

Within three or four hours of walking, they had become rather familiar with each other and could see the town of River Cove in the distance.

In Eliard's eyes, Link, though just a common Magician's Apprentice, was an interesting fellow with a cheerful and generous personality.

They had spoken about almost everything under the sun. Many times, Link seemed to have been able to tell what he was thinking and follow his line of thought. Such clever fellows were rare indeed. It almost made him forget his own embarrassing circumstances.

Yes, he was pretty pathetic right now, especially in terms of finances. Being an orphan, no one would willingly support his magic studies. He had no choice but to do his best and make money on his own doing any job he could find. He made barely enough to pay his fees for the magic academy. As for his other expenses, he could only scrimp and save to avoid going hungry.

I'm so lucky to have made such a friend, Eliard rejoiced.

Link felt the same way. Eliard was a true prodigy. His brilliant mind was able to follow many of the jokes from Earth that Link told.

But there was one thing that still bothered Link.

His own appearance was really quite plain and his body rather frail. With his common gray robes and without his wand, he looked just like any old commoner on the streets. On the contrary, Eliard was incomparably handsome, tall and fit. The normal clothes Eliard wore were unable to hide his brilliance.

Link looked just like Eliard's subordinate when they stood side-by-side.

I'm now the leaf that brings out the red of the blooms, Link lamented.

Indeed, Eliard drew everyone's attention in River Cove Town, especially the ladies. Their eyes glowed, wolf-like as their gazes followed him. While Link, next to him, was ignored completely. At the inn, the owner looked towards Eliard and asked, "Do you want to stay here Sir?"

Eliard nodded. Gritting his teeth, he handed over the money for two rooms. Link was his savior; he couldn't allow Link to pay.

By this point, Link knew all about Eliard's circumstances from the conversations they'd shared. He strode up and placed a gold coin on the counter. "Two of your best rooms, please and thank you."

Turning to Eliard, he casually said, "Don't argue. Just take it as my repaying you for the drinks from last time."

He knew that Eliard was in a tight spot financially. And the reason they had come to the inn, despite Eliard having expressed his preference to travel through the night, was that Link hadn't slept properly in almost two days.

The so-called 'returning of money' was so as not to humiliate Eliard.

Eliard was taken aback for a moment. Then, he understood. Gratitude filled his heart as he nodded. Though he remained silent, he would remember the favor in the future.

The years he had spent wandering had taught him the cold and evil things of this world. Pure and good intentions like Link's were hard to come by, and he remembered each and every one, hoping that he would be able to repay them someday.

The two of them had their dinner in the inn's hall. Link paid the bill before both of them retired to their rooms.

Back in his room, Link went to bed after washing up. But he tossed and turned and was unable to fall asleep. He decided to look through the items in the pendant Celine had given him.

The pendant was too precious, too valuable for Link to display it to everyone. He could only look at in private.

His consciousness, entering the pendant, found itself within a murky gray place, around 30 feet tall and 30 feet wide where items floated around in piles.

The first thing he saw was a stack of magic books, up to 64 of them. The Flemmings Magic Academy's most valuable books were all there.

Then came some low-level potions. There weren't many, only seven or eight bottles, all which he had gotten from the Alchemy Tower. The only other things left in the murky space was a pile of gold coins. He counted 1315 of them. Celine had left him all the gold.

Though they'd only been apart for less than a day, Link already missed her very much.

I wonder if she's managed to get rid of the demons from the Deep? Is she well now? Questions filled Link's head as he felt the new sensation of longing and worry for the first time.

I'm still too weak! Link sighed. Even if he was by her side, he would only be a burden to her.

He rubbed the pendant with one hand as he clasped the feathers that he had hidden next to his chest. It was comforting—it made him feel like Celine was right there beside him.

He was extremely tired and fell asleep after half an hour. When he opened his eyes, he found that the sky was still pitch black. Link pulled out his pocket watch. It was two in the morning. He'd slept for around six hours.

But those six hours made him feel completely refreshed. He felt the warmth return to his fingertips as if he were in a hot spring. It was comforting, and his mind was clearer and sharper than ever, no longer dazed as it had been in sleep before.

He could analyze whatever problems popped up in his mind quickly and systematically. The questions his body's original owner had regarding magic were solved with little thought paid to them.

Is this what I'm like at my peak? If I were to take an IQ examination, the original Link would probably get a maximum of 90 points. I would probably have gotten about 130

as I was back on Earth, just a little better than average. But now, I'd definitely get more than 250...No, 260. Whatever. But this mind is invincible!

It'd be a waste if such a sharp mind wasn't put to good use!

Link pulled out a magic book from the pendant. It was called "Spell Structure". He flipped to the index. It listed the common Level-0 Spells: Earth Spike, Fireball, Wind Blade, Grease, Lesser Invisibility. The book explained each in detail.

It was just what Link needed.

"As the idiom goes, 'an hour in the morning is worth two in the evening'. I'll start my studies of magic now!"

Putting his nose in the book, he began to read diligently.

Chapter 31

His First Level-0 Spell (2)

Link never thought that for someone who was a poor student on earth, he would actually be able to sit quietly and focus his attention on reading a dry and technical textbook on magic and spells. In fact, he had been engrossed in the reading for almost a whole day.

When he started, he had to force himself to focus. It was almost torturous at first—his eyelids were heavy from the endless numerical Mana formulas and the sea of magic runes that looked like nothing he'd ever seen before.

But as his focus gradually settled into the subject of the book, he became more and more interested in the contents, and by the end of it, he was completely enthralled.

The experience of reading the magic textbooks now was completely different from what he experienced last night while reading Theory of Mana Turbulence in Celine's room. Yesterday, he was only roughly scanning the book's pages; he wasn't paying close attention at all, and he didn't apply himself to the knowledge. But this time, Link put in all his efforts into the book.

He flipped through each page slowly, sometimes he even stopped between pages to carefully think about what he had just read.

According to the book, spells were divided into six major types: elemental spells, secret spells, conjuring spells, summoning spells, enchanting spells, and alchemy spells.

For spells of Level-3 and below, the differences between these various types of spells weren't significant. A Magician could develop their skills in all types of spells. But as the Magician reached Level-3 and above, they would need to specialize and decide which type of spells to focus on.

A Magician could normally only develop and advance their skills in only one spell type. To be an expert in more than one type of spell after Level-4 was fundamentally impossible, and very rarely were there any exceptions.

The book, *Foundation Structure of Spells*, listed Fireball and Earth Spike as examples of elemental spells, and Lesser Invisibility as a conjuring spell. As for secret spells and summoning spells, there were no examples given because these two branches were extremely obscure subjects. Very rarely could someone learn about them through textbooks alone. The only way to learn about them was to study directly with a tutor.

As he finished reading about the magic structure of Fireball, Link took out his New Moon wand and tried to cast the spell.

The spellcasting process consisted of three steps: first was to attract Mana, the second was to build the spell's structure, and the third was to release the spell.

The most critical phase was building the spell's structure. The success of any spellcasting process depended on this very step.

Link focused all his attention and followed each point instructed in the book. Two seconds later, the tip of the New Moon wand lit up, and a tiny point of light appeared in thin air near the tip of the wand.

This was the Fireball spell's prototype.

The light point was about the size of a grain of rice, it was maintained for about a second, and then with a puff, the light disappeared into thin air.

If the building of the spell structure failed, then the spellcasting would abruptly come to an end.

This can be quite difficult.

Link pursed his lips. He realized that this method of learning was completely different from the way he learned the spells he obtained with his Omni points. Right now, Mana was as wild and mischievous as a child. When he wanted it to go left, it would insist on going right. When he wanted it to stabilize, it would become agitated. It was almost impossible to keep it under his control.

Link tried again.

Three seconds later, there was another puff, and a pebble-sized light orb once again appeared then rapidly disappeared—another failed attempt at Fireball.

Link felt a hot rush of air hit his face. He was lucky that he was only testing out a Level-0 spell. Had it been the Level-4 spell, Flame Blast, and he had messed up in the middle of the spellcasting process, he would've been burnt to a crisp.

Magic was considered to be the biggest force in this world. But it was also a double-edged sword. The more powerful the Magician the more cautious they had to be at spellcasting. This was a saying by a famous Master Magician, whom which Link now deeply agreed with.

If one couldn't stand the collapse of a Level-4 spell, then a legendary spell might even kill them.

In truth, Magicians who wished to study high-level spells must make use of different types of tools to aid them. The most important among these tools was a fully functioning Mage Tower.

A Mage Tower could help a Magician by monitoring and controlling the area surrounding the tower, and the equipment inside the tower could also be used to protect them while they were experimenting with new spells.

However, the downside of these towers was the cost to build them. A normal Mage Tower required a huge amount of magic and anti-magic materials, costing about 10,000 gold coins to build—an unbelievably high price.

Strength always came at a cost.

Magic was like an expensive hobby that burned up money at the speed that was simply unbelievable to the average man!

Of course, Link had not thought of Mage Towers yet at this moment. Fireball was nothing but a Level-0 spell, he could boldly experiment with it without worrying about his safety.

The third, fourth, and fifth time casting the spell were all failures. Then on the sixth attempt, after about five seconds, a white marble-sized glass orb finally appeared at the end of the wand's tip.

Link now directly observed and experienced the whole process of how a spell came to be from scratch.

Mana flows in, and the spell's structure was constructed, and the fire element was drawn in, building a stable structure. What a beautiful process.

He felt a warm rush of air from the small fireball in front of him and Link's heart was filled with pride at his small achievement.

Fireball was the very first spell that he had truly learned.

But then Link laughed at himself. This is just a Level-0 spell, and I still needed five seconds to cast it. Besides, my Fireball is only good for lighting a match.

In the game, he could release Level-0 spells in 0.1 seconds. Only with that speed could they be of any use in battle.

However, Link had faith that he would get better in time with more practice.

Link also had no reason to worry that he would use up all of the Mana in his body while practicing. He made sure to reabsorb the Mana used for the spell, and so when the Fireball slowly disappeared, the lost energy re-entered Link's body.

Then, Link let some more Mana flow into the wand, then built the spell structure again. This time, after four seconds, the Fireball was completed.

Link was beginning to get the hang of it, and he incessantly practiced again and again.

He was so fully immersed that he was unaware of the flow of time.

He cast the spell again and again, not realizing when the spellcasting using his own efforts and the spellcasting obtained from Omni Points melded together and became indistinguishable.

Fwoosh. A stable fireball appeared at the tip of his wand, and then—puff, the fireball disappeared, and the Mana was re-absorbed. All of this happened quickly, just as one would switch lights on and off.

Without knowing it, Link's spellcasting had sped up to less than 0.1 seconds. Link felt that in just one second he could release at least 20 Fireballs.

He was in an unusual state right now, where he still received aids and boosts from the gaming system, but he could also feel and understand each step in the process of

spellcasting and the underlying structure of the spells.

"Did you boost my spellcasting?" Link asked the gaming system. It would be impossible for him to advance so quickly if it was only just his efforts.

The gaming system replied.

Of course. Repeated practice of a single move would only consume a player's energy, and wouldn't help with the player's understanding towards magic. When the player has developed their understanding of the spell's foundation, the system will boost the player's spellcasting to speed up their overall spellcasting speed.

"Then how fast can I release each Level-0 spell exactly?"

0.0512 seconds. That's the limit for Fire Element spells. You can't get any faster than that.

Spellcasting time for elemental spells was divided into two parts: First, was the Mana structure construction time. This depended on the mental speed of the Magician, which could surely be improved with practice. Second, was the time for the elements to accumulate and arrange into proper configuration. This speed depended on the concentration of the elements in the surrounding area. To compare between the snowy grounds of the North and the deserts of the South, the latter would accumulate fire elements ten times faster than the former.

In the room that Link was staying, fire elements needed 0.05 seconds to accumulate, and this was the fastest time limit for the spell.

Oh, that means I'm pretty fast then. 0.0512 seconds, that was as fast as lightning. Link was satisfied with this level of progress.

The next time he practiced Fireballs, he didn't pay too much attention in controlling the stability of the spell structure, instead, he put his efforts into the process of attracting fire elements.

After more than ten minutes, a doubt emerged in Link's mind. There are flaws in this spell's structure.

Once he'd gotten practice and some experience, Link now started to question things. He now understood the whole spellcasting process, and he could discern some

shortcomings in the structure of the Fireball spell.

He paid thorough attention to the structure of the spell and made further discoveries.

This spell's process in drawing on fire elements from its surroundings isn't perfect, and not very efficient. But it is very stable, and the simplest and easiest to develop. But these aren't what I need in my spells, maybe I can modify and improve it.

Link was a man of action; once he had an idea he immediately set out to do it.

But at this moment, someone knocked on the door. From outside, Eliard called out, "Link, it's time to get going now."

Link turned around to look out the window. It was only then that he realized that the sky was getting light.

"Wait, I'm coming," Link responded hurriedly.

Putting away his wand, he hastily washed his face and tried to make himself appear more energetic. But, from what he'd seen in the mirror, no matter how he looked at himself, he just looked like an average person. The ailing Mana had surely been affecting him.

He opened the door and saw Eliard. Link felt even more nervous now.

After a good night's rest, Eliard had changed into new clothes. His whole person seemed more vivacious now, as if he were glowing. Those pair of light green eyes of his were clear, yet meaningful as if they were shining themselves. Anyone who saw him would know that he had strong spirits.

In magic, there was a spell called Aura Detection, where one could measure the auras emanating from a target.

Link hadn't learned it yet, but he believed that if anyone were to check Eliard using this spell, they would find that he was glowing with a brilliant Mana force.

Ah, what can you say when he's the number one most talented Magician and the number one most handsome man in the game. He really has a dashing appearance that no one can compare to! Link couldn't help but lament.

After the two had their breakfasts in the hall, they were on the move.

East Cove Academy was 30 miles southeast of River Cove town, in a coven area. It wasn't that far away since the road was level. They only had to walk for about two hours, then the cove entrance was already in view.

At the entrance was a massive stone plaque, and on it, written in huge letters, was the name of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy. There was a crest on top, with a lion's head in the middle, and crossing wands beneath it, signifying magic in service of the Kingdom of Norton.

Beside the stone plaque was a small two-story wooden building, and in front of the building was a courtyard where a white-haired old man clad in a bluish grey Magician's robe was sunbathing on a long chair.

Just as Link turned to the direction of the old man, a notification flashed up.

Vincent

Level-2 Normal Magician

Status: Measures constant auras.

Position: East Cove Magic Academy admission and qualification tester.

At the time Vincent saw Link and Eliard, he swept a glance at them and asked, "Are both of you trying to enter the academy?"

"Yes," both of them answered respectfully.

Vincent raised the wand in his hand and pointed it towards Eliard, then nodded, "You may enter, as long as you can pay the tuition fees."

He pointed the wand towards Link, then shook his head, "You, your innate Mana is too low. Unless, if you could prove you have enough knowledge and insight in magic, if not then go back to where you came from."

Chapter 32

A Glimmer of Sunlight in a Cold, Cruel World (1)

This gatekeeper certainly calls it like he sees it.

Fortunately, Link was prepared for this kind of outcome. His current Maximum Mana limit was now 24.1—a very low figure, no different from that of an average Magician's Apprentice. It would take a miracle for him to get accepted into this academy.

Of course, he still had 105 Omni Points left, and he could spend all of it to increase his Maximum Mana. Even if Ailing Mana had a 90% effect on him, by exchanging one Omni Point with 10 Points of Maximum Mana, he could increase his Maximum Mana to 129.1 Points. That was equivalent to that of a typical Level-2 Magician, and enough for admission into the magic academy.

But that would be a silly thing to do. Yes, he might possess the power of a Level-2 Magician, but his knowledge would be nowhere near that. And if he did enter the academy this way, he would naturally be assigned to classes for Level-2 Magicians—classes that would be completely incomprehensible to him. What would be the point of that?

Admittedly, Link was only here to try his luck. He knew that if he was rejected he would just have to go back to the inn and teach himself the basic foundations of magic, and then he'd try again. He wouldn't feel too bad about being turned away, so he responded to Eliard's sympathetic stare with a smile, signifying he was fine.

Nonetheless, this experience had taught him a valuable lesson. He would never have guessed that one could enter the East Cove Higher Magic Academy with just a thesis. Nothing like that was ever mentioned in the game on Earth.

In fact, in the game, once you reached a certain level, you could just pay a certain amount of money and bam—you were now a student of the Higher Magic Academy.

"How could my friend prove his skill in magic then?" asked Eliard.

Vincent snickered as he scrutinized Eliard's appearance from head to toe. He gave the

young man's attire the once-over and said jeeringly, "Worry about yourself, boy! The tuition fees of the Eastern Cove High Magic Academy aren't cheap you know?"

Vincent had seen all walks of life, and this had allowed him to accurately judge a person's situation in life just based on their appearance. With a mere glance, he could clearly see the disparity in quality between these two young men's clothing. This unremarkable young man might have been wearing a plain grey robe, but it was made of fine squirrel fur, the value of which was at least ten times higher than that of the shiny new clothes on the pretty boy's body.

By his estimation, he was sure that the ordinary looking young man must be of the noble class. His companion, on the other hand, was nothing more than a simple commoner.

Regarding funds, Eliard had naturally come prepared. Before preparing for magic training, he had thought over and over of various ways he could make money. Fortunately, he had a decent brain between his ears, and that allowed him to find a way to save up 200 gold coins—the exact amount, from what he had heard, needed for the academy's tuition fees.

"Oh, you mean the 200 gold coins? I've got it right here," Eliard said with a laugh.

To the young man's surprise, Vincent shook his head and laughed. He held up two fingers and said, "No, no, you've got it all wrong my boy. It isn't 200 gold coins for you, that is the price for a student who came from a noble family. For a commoner, it's 300 gold coins. Unfortunately, though, the academy received too many students this year, so there isn't any space left. If you do enter the academy, you will be an extra member of the student body, and as such, you will be charged for the extra arrangements and extra materials—and these, of course, will cost money. As a commoner you won't be entitled to benefits or discounts, so all in all, the total fees will amount to 2000 gold coins."

Eliard was stunned, and his brows furrowed. "It can't possibly be ten times the usual amount! That's ridiculous!"

How many commoners in this world could fork over 2000 gold coins!? Only the rich merchants of the Northern Free District could ever afford such a ridiculous sum of money.

This is nothing more but a barely masked effort to prevent commoners from learning magic!

Link, however, knew that the magic academy wasn't just trying screw them over. Money was essential to a Magician. What commoners might view as a large sum of money could easily be spent in a heartbeat on a random piece of magical gear.

Take this New Moon wand in his hand, for example. This single wand alone would've cost him 1000 gold coins. And if it's the Crystal Fire Staff we're talking about, then the price could easily go over 3000 gold coins!

He had encountered a similar situation like this in the game back on Earth. You had to spend money immediately after choosing to become a Magician! The price to pay for magic skills training alone was already more expensive than the other professions, let alone the various other gears needed to practice magic.

From Vincent's perspective, 2000 gold coins wasn't just a random number he coughed up. It was roughly the calculated cost needed to study magic, but of course, he knew that this explanation alone could not conceal the academy's unfair treatment towards commoners.

But Eliard was unfamiliar with the world of Magicians, and this caused him to erupt in anger.

Vincent's countenance was relaxed and unmoved. He spread out his hands, leaned back into his seat and glibly said, "There's nothing I can do about it. I'm not the one setting the price, after all. These are orders from the academy dean. I am simply the messenger."

However, Eliard still had another trick up his sleeve. He pulled out a letter. "I've got a recommendation letter from Duchess Alice."

Vincent glanced up and saw a wax seal on the letter and immediately recognized the blooming rose insignia—it really was the seal of the Norton Kingdom's one and only Duchess.

He looked at Eliard's strikingly handsome face, then laughed. "Oh, what a blessing to be born good-looking!" he mocked. "You could even get a noble to write you a recommendation letter! Well, according to the academy dean's orders, with a letter of recommendation from a noble, fees are cut down by 500 gold coins, making it 1500

gold coins!"

Seeing this letter, Link suddenly saw how clever this young man really was. No commoner could earn 200 gold coins even if they worked their back off their whole life. Yet, this young man had somehow managed to earn that much by the age of 17. He had even obtained a letter of recommendation from a duchess to boot! Link knew that such things could have only been achieved through great sacrifice.

But 1500 gold coins was still an unacceptable amount of money for Eliard. He couldn't contain his anger any longer and finally lost his cool. "This is blatant robbery!" he shouted through clenched teeth, his face red.

Vincent shook his head, unmoved. "I'm warning you boy, you're lucky I'm in a good mood today, so I will let your impudence pass," he said with a sinister calm. "But if you ever utter such drivel to a Magician who's not as forgiving as I am, I assure you you'll pay for it in blood!"

Sensing that Eliard was going to continue arguing with the gatekeeper, Link quickly pulled him back by his arm.

Right now they were nobodies, while on the other hand, the East Cove Higher Magic Academy was the most prestigious magic academy in the Kingdom of Norton. The academy's dean was also a Level-7 Master Magician. If they lost their temper here, it would achieve nothing, and only leave a bad impression of themselves on the academy and the dean.

Eliard was a commoner and he didn't have enough money for the tuition fees. Although there might have been some unfair treatment towards commoners on the academy's part, these were just the facts of life. No amount of shouting and arguing could change anything.

Link became the first ever Archmage in the gaming server back on Earth all because he had full control of his emotions. He never complained nor held grudges against anyone, and he would never get riled up without good reason either. Whenever he was faced with a problem, he would stay calm and collected, and try to solve the issue with reason and logic.

It was indeed this strong character of his that enabled Link to become the first ever Archmage. And for this same reason, when the God of Light dumped him into this

strange unfamiliar world, not only was Link able to escape from Gladstone city alive, he was even able to save the city from ruin. And as he was then, his character remained just as strong now.

Link understood that in order to abolish this unfair rule from the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, a few dissenting voices wouldn't amount to anything. Real change would only come when everyone was forced to notice the absurdity of the rule.

With a slight tug from Link, Eliard slowly came to his senses, but his eyes had already turned red. It wasn't that he had never experienced society's unfair treatments before. In fact, under normal circumstances, he wouldn't lose control over his emotions so easily, but this matter was too close to his heart. He couldn't just give in. He had fought tooth and nail just to get to this point. He had endured unimaginable pain and many hardships just to earn those 200 gold coins.

To earn the money, he undertook dangerous missions. Because he had no fighting skills, he had to navigate dangerous investigative assignments in which he had only a one in ten chance of surviving.

Apart from those missions, he also did all kinds of businesses, frequently receiving extortion threats from ruffians and rogues. He still managed to save his money though, copper by copper.

Ever since he was ten, except for when he was invited to dine with his friends, he would only have three coarse wheat buns a day, and nothing else. Sometimes, when he felt that he was not getting enough nutrients, he would go to the river in the middle of the night and catch some small fish and shrimp to eat. He could only do this at night because he was too busy working during the day. He wore the same clothing for three years. Even the old horse he rode was not actually his. It was, in fact, a parting gift from a friend.

When he had heard of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy's prejudice against commoners, he knew he had to obtain a recommendation letter from a noble by any means necessary.

To that end, he swallowed his pride and slept with that fat, ugly duchess for a whole month. He endured this humiliating and demeaning experience every night, casting his dignity aside.

He had suffered through hell, and he had sacrificed everything that mattered all to chase his dream of becoming a Magician, to ensure that his natural talents wouldn't go to waste, and to prove himself and stand a head above the rest.

But now that he had finally earned enough money, obtained that recommendation letter, and showed up at the door of the academy full of hope, reality had once again dealt another blow to his chest.

Simple words plainly uttered had raised the goal of admission into the academy to unattainable heights. In the end, all of his hard work had amounted to nothing. Should he start over and try to earn more money again?

By the time he earned 1500 gold coins, he would already be over 20 years old. If luck wasn't on his side, he might just die on his missions before that.

The next few years of his life were critical for magic training. How could he just throw them all away?

At that moment, the enraged, hurt, and hopeless young Eliard looked up at his dream right in front of him, but there was an impenetrable moat obstructing him. His eyes had unknowingly started to redden.

A commoner chasing his own dream—how much more difficult can such a simple task be? Eliard balled up his fists, raised his chin, and forbade himself from showing any tears. He would not make a fool of himself in front of this glorified guard dog.

But Vincent had long seen through him. He shook his head and chuckled while uttering these cold words, "May I suggest a brilliant solution to your woes, boy? Why don't you just go back to Duchess Alice and serve her well? Who knows, she might end up paying all the fees for you? Hehehe."

Eliard was so livid he shook. This matter was his biggest shame. Vincent's words had sliced through him and cut open the terrible scar in his heart.

His face turned scarlet, his heart beat so hard it could jump out of his throat. He clenched his fists tightly, having only one thought in his head—whatever the consequences, he would beat this old man to a pulp.

Just as his rage reached its peak, someone grabbed his arm. He struggled to break free, but the grip on his arm tightened. "Let go of me!" Eliard demanded.

Link's voice cut through the fog that clouded his judgment. "Eliard, don't bring yourself to ruin!"

This voice was like a cold splash of water to the face. Eliard's struggle gradually became weaker and weaker.

Eliard turned his head and came face to face with the young man who was then quietly staring back at him, gently shaking his head. Link's eyes glimmered softly. His face was ordinary and plain, yet the young man emanated a spirit that could calm a heart at its wildest as if there was nothing in this world that could provoke or disturb him. As calm as a still lake, as piercing as a knife's blade. This moment, this scene would forever be etched into Eliard's heart.

Many years from now, whenever he was in a fury, in doubt or in despair, this memory would emerge again and again to remind him how a true Magician should act in the face of this cold, cruel world.

Chapter 33

A Glimmer of Sunlight in a Cold, Cruel World (2)

Eliard calmed down. Although his spirits remained gloomy, he was still able to keep himself under control.

When Link was sure that Eliard wouldn't lose his temper anymore, he stepped forward and gave Vincent a reverent Magician's bow. "Mr. Vincent, may I ask, how do I prove my own insight in magic?" he respectfully asked.

"Simple, all you need to do is write a thesis that shows your understanding of the world and the universe." Vincent closed his eyes and lazily rocked in his chair. That good-looking young man had calmed down, but really, he was a bit disappointed. Had the boy dared to raise his hand, Vincent would've gladly carved a few magic runes on that pretty little face.

"Oh, could you be a bit more specific?" Link's attitude was deferential, and that made Vincent happy.

"Your thesis need not be about magic, as long as you show a unique perspective and a deep deductive power, and if this thesis of yours receives approval of one of the tutors, you will be accepted into the academy. But of course, the tuition fees would still be 2000 gold coins, or if you come from a noble family, 1000 gold coins."

"I see."

Link was deep in thought for about five seconds, then he had come up with an idea. He then said in a tone full of regard, "Mr. Vincent, sir, thank you very much for your guidance."

"Ha, now that is a young man befitting of a Magician." Vincent leaned back in his chair on the courtyard. He nodded slightly, then looked at Eliard and said, "You, on the other hand, are just too brash. That attitude of yours needs some mending, otherwise, you'll be regretting it when it's too late!"

Eliard snorted, then turned his head around. He felt his blood boil again from the sight

of that self-assured old geezer.

Link stepped backward a few steps until he reached Eliard's side. "Let's go back for now," he said softly.

Eliard nodded. His face was pale, but he still followed behind Link.

He felt as if he couldn't face his friend. He had thought that he could enter the academy, then somehow help Link. But now, all his plans had crumbled.

Once they were about 100 feet away from the school, Link consoled Eliard with a smile.

"Come on, stop being angry, he was just a Level-2 Magician. Once you enter the academy, I'm sure you could easily surpass him with your level of talent. When that day comes, he'd definitely flatter you like a lapdog."

"I'm afraid there's no way for me to enter the academy. I'll never be able to get 1500 gold coins, that's just too expensive!" Eliard's face was full of dejection. He was just hit with a huge roadblock, and he had given up hope.

I have 200 gold coins, I can live comfortably as a commoner, marry a beautiful girl, live a decent life without becoming a Magician, how bad can that be? The idea flashed through his mind.

As these thoughts ran through his head, Eliard let out a long sigh.

All these years, magic had been his only goal in life, yet it had always brought him misery and pain, never once an ounce of happiness. He simply couldn't bear it anymore.

Link saw the way Eliard looked and could guess what was on his mind. He softly patted Eliard's shoulder, smiled, and said, "Don't worry, my friend, it's just the matter of fees. You don't have to be so gloomy. I've still got 1300 gold coins with me, I can lend it to you, and add that to your 200 gold coins, then you'd have just enough to enter the academy."

"What did you say?!" Eliard couldn't help but gasp. He thought he misheard.

This was 1300 gold coins—not silver coins, not copper coins—gold coins. That was an

amount of money that normal people couldn't even imagine. It was about the amount that a few thousand commoners in River Cove town needed for food and other necessities in a year.

And now, this young man whom he had just met had offered this much money to him. He was dumbfounded and was unsure of what to think. He was a mixed bag of emotions: happiness, alarm, doubt, worry, and reluctance.

Link was still smiling. "Are you afraid that I might have unreasonable demands in return for helping you?"

Eliard fell silent, but the silence was full with agreement.

He wasn't a naive child who hadn't experienced such things. He knew no one would offer kindness and help for nothing, and he knew not to expect free pies to fall out of the sky into his hands, especially not when it came from nobles.

This was what Duchess Alice had taught him. Even though she was as pretty as a pig, in the month that he had spent with her, Eliard had, in fact, learned some valuable lessons.

Link could guess the thoughts running through Eliard's mind, so he explained, "You know I'm a viscount's son. But I'm the third son, I have no rights to inherit his title, only a meager amount of his money. In that way, I'm just like you, I have to rely on myself and work my way up. You see, between us both, you're the one who can easily enter the academy. So what I'm thinking is, if you could enter the academy first, and then become a stellar student, then maybe you could recommend me or find an opportunity for me to enter the academy too. And as for the fees, well, don't you worry, my father is a viscount after all, isn't he?"

They had only known each other for a day, so Link knew not to spew any nonsense about friendship and loyalty. If he did say such things, it would only arouse Eliard's suspicions.

So, he stated his own plans honestly and clearly. He thought his plans made sense, and he was sure that Eliard would understand that it's a win-win situation for both of them.

But even so, there was no denying that this was a great act of kindness on Link's part.

"Aren't you afraid that I'd just run off with the money?" Eliard was moved, but he still didn't understand why Link would risk doing such a thing. After all, they had only known each other for a day. What made Link trust him so much?

He understood that 1300 gold coins was still a hefty amount of money, even for a viscount's son. He suspected that it was Link's whole inheritance, and if Eliard ran off with this money, it would leave Link destitute.

Link's father would not lift a finger to help, Eliard was sure of that. He knew the nobles well; he knew how heartless they could be.

Link smiled and looked into Eliard's eyes and plainly said, "Eliard, your natural talents in magic are immense. I can clearly see in your eyes that you are fully committed towards magic. I know that if you were to have a chance to learn magic, you would become a Master Magician one day. Is a Master Magician's honor worth just 1300 gold coins? If it turns out to be so, well I'll blame my own judgment and my own stupidity then."

Eliard was speechless for a long while. Then, he bowed low in front of Link, and that striking face of his turned solemn. "Link, from this day onwards, you are my lifelong friend. I will never betray your trust!"

Link patted Eliard's shoulder and said, "Don't worry about it, my friend. Things won't be as bad as it seems. I know some aristocrats, I'm sure they would write me a recommendation letter. Plus, I've got an idea for a thesis that could prove my knowledge of magic."

"Oh, what is it about?" asked Eliard, full of interest.

Link picked up a stone from the ground, flung it upwards, then after a few seconds, the stone fell back down to the ground. He then looked at Eliard and said, "Can you guess what it is?"

Eliard stared at him wide-eyed. He thought and thought, but was simply befuddled, so he scratched his head and said, "What is it?"

"What do you think made the stone fall back down to the ground?" Link replied.

He came from Earth, so he had a basic knowledge of scientific theories, even though in he hadn't been a very studious person back then. But now that he had a much more

vigorous soul, he could easily understand what used to confuse him so much before.

To write a thesis that would grant him admission into the academy—Link had the wealth of knowledge from the scientific masterminds from Earth to learn from, so he felt no pressure at all.

But with just this one question, Eliard felt as if he fell into an endless pit.

In the beginning, he thought the question had an obvious answer, but the more deeply he thought about it, the more perplexed he became. With a puzzled look on his face, he repeated Link's words, "You're right, why would a stone always fall to the ground?"

Why didn't it continue flying upwards? Why didn't it out shoot horizontally? What kind of force always pulled it back down to the ground?

Chapter 34

From the Stones to the Sun, the Stars and the Universe

With Link's help, Eliard managed to get 1500 gold coins for the tuition fees. Because he also possessed prodigal talents in magic, he was naturally accepted into the academy without further ado.

Link, on the other hand, fell on hard times. He had given almost all of his money to Eliard, and now there were only 6 gold coins left for him.

Even though he already had an idea for his thesis, Link knew that his academic aptitude in the previous world was nothing to shout about. He wasn't a particularly bad student, but he was far from being the top, and he only had a basic understanding of the things he'd learned.

He might now be gifted with remarkable intelligence, but in order to produce a sound thesis, he would still need a lot of time and mental exertion. Consequently, he had no time at all to think of ways to earn money.

To save the money he still had left, he moved from the best room in the River Cove inn to a small attic on the top floor. The rent for the attic was very cheap, only 50 coppers a night. The room was always draughty and it was very small too, barely over a hundred square feet. It also had no bed. It originally didn't have a table either but Link managed to persuade the innkeeper to put in a table and chair, with an agreement that he would pay half a month's rent for each.

It wasn't a fair deal, but Link didn't mind it much because he had no need for luxury in order to survive; a place to stay, a roof over his head, and he's satisfied.

He went to the sundry shop to buy a quill pen, some ink, and some goatskin paper. These cost him 9 silver coins. Then he bought some more daily necessities until, at last, he was left with only one gold coin and one silver coin in his money bag. (one gold coin is worth ten silver coins.) He still needed money to eat, so he must start skimping more.

Presently, he had two major problems to solve. One was the thesis paper that he had to write, and the other was the 1500 gold coins for the tuition.

Well, I guess I'll finish writing that thesis first, then I'll worry about the money later. I'll find a way when the time comes.

Eliard was completely oblivious to the problems Link was facing, of course. He was now staying in the academy dorm and had started learning magic. East Cove enforced a closed-door policy on its students. Once you're inside, you wouldn't be allowed to go out of the cove without special permission. So for a long period of time, Link wouldn't be able to see Eliard—they could only communicate through letters.

But Link thought this was fine, he didn't plan to let Eliard know all the problems he was facing anyway. After tidying up his things and settling down in his new room, he sat down on the tattered little chair and started to write his first thesis essay.

He dipped the quill in ink, then stared out through a small window in the attic. He saw that Girventh Forest bathed in sunlight. "What should I write about?" he mumbled to himself.

He thought about it for a few minutes, then scribbled down in a flowing hand, "From Falling Stones to the Sun, the Moon and the Stars: The Theory of Universal Interactive Forces".

Since he was going to write a thesis, he might as well shoot for the stars and attempt to write something grand, so grand that it would surely grab everyone's attention!

Link was recalling his memories from the previous world and was surprised at how clear and accurate his recollection of that distant place was. There was no confusion nor fragmented pieces of memories. He thought he would've completely forgotten all about the Law of Universal Gravitation, but in fact, when he tried to recall it in detail, he realized that these bits of knowledge were like treasures buried in the corner of his mind, all waiting for him to do a little digging to retrieve them.

There was mathematics in the world Firuman too. In fact, their mathematics had progressed to a decent extent, although not in the same path that it took on Earth. Here, mathematics was only a branch of magical studies, a mere tool for research.

To put it more accurately, magic studies covered every field of knowledge in Firuman, and mathematics was just a small area branching out of it.

The young man whose body Link now inhabited had studied in the Flemmings Academy for quite some time. He might not have learned true magic, but he had a decent understanding of the basic foundations of it. What knowledge the young man had gained was enough for Link to start writing his thesis.

And perhaps because he already had a solid understanding of the basics, his analysis and deductions went smoothly. He found that he could effortlessly focus his attention, easily ignoring any stray thoughts or distractions, and all his mental processes were concentrated solely on the thesis.

Because of that, as he began to write, he was completely immersed in the task, forgetting the flow of time.

Under this kind of sustained rigorous thinking, Link began to logically analyze the hypothesis of the omnipresent force's mutual attraction that he had postulated earlier.

At first, Link thought that all would go according to plan—he would put in all his efforts into writing an impressive thesis that would leave everyone in awe, then he would find a way to get the money for the fees, and voila! Into the East Cove Academy, he would go.

But just as theory and practice usually clash, Link realized, as he went further into the deductions for his thesis, that he had a problem.

Link knew that he would eventually arrive at the universal gravitational law at the conclusion of his thesis, he thought that it wouldn't be difficult to come up with the final mathematical equation for the universal gravitational law. But as it stood, the further and further he went along the path that logic set out for him, the more he realized that he was actually falling down a completely bizarre rabbit hole.

As he came back to reality, he saw that the goatskin parchment was full of scribblings of mathematical formulas, of Mana runes equations, and he was nearly brought to the brink of insanity.

I was only trying to infer the law of universal gravitation, but what on earth has it come to?

A ghost of the gravitational law did actually emerge on the paper, but so did remnants of the theory of relativity, and many other perplexing things that Link knew nothing about.

And so... well, naturally, he was stumped. He didn't know how to go forward with this line of thought.

What he didn't realize was how postulations like the universal gravitational law or the theory of relativity, if you scrutinize them to their logical roots, all defined the nature of the fabric of space and time in imperfect ways. They might describe nature in fascinating detail, but ultimately there were cracks and flaws and they were not truly universal. There were always exceptions and circumstances where the laws broke down and became useless.

Link also didn't realize that his current mental capacity was much more powerful than he suspected, frighteningly so, in fact. As he followed the path of pure logic, his mind was automatically repairing the flaws and cracks in the theories until it discovered a handful of novel equations that even Link himself had no full comprehension of its significance.

But even when these strange equations did describe the nature of reality, they still came short of doing it perfectly, and it was this imperfection that rendered it befuddling and impenetrable.

To the inexperienced Link, this was just too much, and he was unsurprisingly overwhelmed.

He tapped at his warm forehead, then cleared his head completely of the complex ruminations and stacked the sheets of paper away in a neat pile. His stomach grumbled, so he decided to have a meal, then he would take a walk outside to unwind and breathe easy for a while. Maybe then he would find some solutions for the problems in his thesis.

That's just how Link was. When confronted with a problem, he would never back down or give up, instead, he would step back and think up of ways to solve them to the best of his ability. If the problems were too big to see the light at the end of the tunnel, then he would forge on anyway like a snail, slowly but surely.

Rome wasn't built in a day, so I can't expect to wrap up a grand thesis in a day either. Maybe all I need is a rest, he thought, to soothe himself.

Once he got to the inn hall, he took a loaf of coarse wheat bread and a cup of water and settled down to eat on his own. Once his stomach was filled, Link set out and headed

for the waterfront of the River Cove town.

In the Girvinth Forest, the clear river flowed rapidly, the sun beamed in its full radiance, the crisp autumn breeze blew, and the forest itself was alive with sounds of birdsongs. All of this had put his mind at ease.

After half an hour, Link was suddenly struck with an idea for his thesis. He rushed back to the attic of the inn and immediately went back to work.

But after a few hours, he got stuck again, and no matter how hard he thought about it there was still no solution in sight. He realized that it was already dark, so he ate dinner and decided to rest his mind. He pulled out a book from the pendant and started to read.

Link had mastered the Level-0 spell Fireball, but he noticed some shortcomings in the structure of the magic in the spell. He thought of attempting to fix the flaws but ended up getting interrupted by Eliard. This time, with no one to interfere, he fully applied himself to the problem and threw himself into an experiment.

With the New Moon wand in his hand and a slight quiver in his heart, his Mana started to flow into the wand, its tip glowing in a dim light of magic.

Just like that, Link started to focus on perfecting the magical structure of the Fireball spell.

Little by little, the Mana flowed out of the wand's tip and began to build up the structure of the spell. As the key magic structure was fully formed, the fire element in the air began to coalesce. Then Link began to use his modified magic structure... but he lost control, and with one soft pop, the half-formed fireball collapsed.

This was startling, but Link knew he wouldn't get it right the first time anyway. He started analyzing the modified process that he used from scratch, and once he was sure of the revised procedure, he repeated the experiment.

Pop!

Three seconds later, the immature fireball once again collapsed and dispersed.

Again.

Another pop. But this time he could sustain it for four seconds. This meant that there was 80% more progress. Good.

Again.

Pop!

One more time... pop! He repeated this process about 50 times, but without succeeding even once. In the end, the fireball collapsed when it was around 98% fully-formed.

Link decided to temporarily stop the experiment. Why do I always lose control of the Mana at the very end? he wondered, I must be missing something here.

He thought back to when there was a change in Mana during the experiment. He considered it thoroughly for more than half an hour before he was suddenly struck by the recollection of a simple explanation he had once encountered in a magic textbook.

Hastily, Link scoured the room for his magic textbooks, and after a few minutes, he finally found three of them: The Nature of Mana, Theories of Mana Turbulence and Mana Scattering and Interference.

He relied on the original Link's blurry memory, flipping the pages of the books page by page. In no time at all, he found what he was looking for.

Mana scattering equation and structural interference chart, nine circumstances where a Mana turbulence would occur... but of course! I've made so many mistakes!

Once he was done reading, Link realized how coarse and superficial his understanding of the nature of Mana was. Attempting to perfect magic structure with this level of knowledge was indeed an act of ignorance.

Since my predecessors have provided me with so many stepping stones to climb on, I'd be foolish not to use them.

Even the great scientist Newton had once claimed that he was able to see so far because he was standing on the shoulders of giants, so there was no reason why Link shouldn't do the same. To ignore the great works that had been done before him and attempt to discover everything on his own from scratch—that would truly be the work of an imbecile.

Chapter 35

Link's "Glass Orbs"

Magic was a rigorous subject, anything that was written in the books, meant that it had been experimentally proven countless times before.

Why was this so important?

For a simple reason—any mistakes made in spellcasting could trigger serious accidents. This was a matter of life or death, and those Magicians who were not scrupulous enough in their experiments would be automatically eliminated by the accidents they caused.

Link set aside his wishes to modify and improve spells and started to attentively read the magic textbooks, absorbing the wisdom and knowledge passed down by his precedents.

As he read, he was deeply engrossed by it. He even forgot about his thesis.

There were 63 magic textbooks in his pendant, all of them about the foundation knowledge of magic.

The facts recorded in these textbooks were approved by all Magicians and had been proven true by hundreds and thousands of experiments. So even if the knowledge level was basic, it was the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom from over the years. Some even paid for it with by their lives!

Link read closely, and his extraordinary memory recorded each detail into his mind. His newly obtained intellectual power had also made him understand the philosophies in the books easily.

He had even forgotten to sleep and neglected to eat!

After two weeks, Link had gotten considerably thin from eating just three pieces of coarse wheat bread a day. His eyes had sunken into his face, and his figure was gaunt. But his pair of black eyes now looked like a still lake, serene in its depth, filled with

wisdom.

In these two weeks, Eliard had written two letters to him, telling him of his progress in the academy. Eliard had truly impressive talents. In just a short period of time, he had mastered one Level-0 spell and was even accepted by a Level-5 Mage tutor called Moira as her protégé.

The moment Link read that he grumbled. "Moira – that sounds like a woman's name. What a blessing it is to be born so handsome!"

But Eliard was fitting in nicely in the academy, and that was a good thing.

Link, on the other hand, would tell Eliard of interesting news from the River Cove town. He always made sure to write in cheerful tones—not once did he reveal any hardships he was facing. He would also include questions he had about magic in the letters to Eliard, hoping that he could help him with them.

Of course, Link didn't actually expect Eliard to answer them himself. Didn't that lucky bastard have a tutor to help him?

Eliard's guilt and anxiety were greatly relieved each time he received Link's letters. While he was settling down in the academy, he constantly worried about Link, and would be awaiting news from him with concern and trepidation. But now that he knew Link wasn't doing so bad, Eliard felt much better.

As for the questions that Link posed in the letters, he didn't understand much of them, still, he was willing to do anything to help Link. In truth, any opportunity to help Link made him feel gratified.

So he took the questions to his tutor, Moira.

Moira had been taking special care of Eliard. She would answer every question that he asked her. Eliard was not oblivious to the special perks he was receiving.

Eliard would then copy down Moira's answers to the questions in his letters to Link.

This way, it was as if Link also had a Level-5 Magician mentoring him as he was studying. This kind of communication was a big part of why Link could finish reading 63 basic textbooks in two weeks.

Gently flipping the last page of the last magic textbook he read—The Way of the Magician—there was the name of the author on the book, Bryant, a Master Magician from three hundred years ago. He was the only human to ever become a Legendary Magician.

"My successors, we cross the barrier of time and communicate through words, and these are my words—remember, magic can give you anything, including eternal life. Forge on ahead down this path, keep moving forward, and maybe one day we will meet."

The message seemed to have a hidden meaning, but Bryant had been dead for three hundred years. The whole of nobility in the Norton Kingdom had attended his funeral. There were clear records of it in the historical documents— there was no cause to doubt the authenticity of those documents.

So Link just took the message as a dead man's witticism and didn't think more of it.

Gently he placed The Way of the Magician together with all the books he had read.

Not only did he finish reading them, he had also remembered every detail and understood and digested each piece of information.

Right now, Link was no longer a complete novice in magic, nor was he the underachieving student of the Flemmings Lower Magic Academy. He had now truly grasped the essential knowledge that is the foundation of magic.

And so, it was time for Link to revisit the idea of modifying the Fireball spell's structure. He now had many fresh ideas to commence from.

He took out his New Moon wand then closed his eyes and concentrated. The insights he achieved after two weeks of study swiftly emerged in his mind.

These insights then merged with his knowledge of spell structure of Fireball, and like pouring hot oil to the fire, an explosion of inspiration and ideas resulted.

Five minutes later, because of Link's amazing imaginative power, a novel spell structure was fully formed in his mind.

Then, Link opened his eyes.

And in that instant, the pair of eyes which had been dulled by Ailing Mana came back to life. He reached out his hand holding the wand, and Mana flowed into it. Runes on the wand lit up one by one before finally, the new moon at the tip of the wand glowed too.

In the air right in front of the wand, a speck of light appeared. When observed carefully, the fire elements in the speck were actually rotating at a high speed, but it wasn't an ordinary type of rotation at all. It was an internal rotation, with the structure of a whirlpool.

It was as if in the heart of the light speck there was a black hole that sucked in fire elements from its surroundings, and the rotation of the fire element was a way to maintain the stability of the structure.

A second later, the speck of light expanded to the size of a glass marble—the usual scale of a normal fireball.

But there was a difference. The fireballs that Link used to produce were white, and waves surrounded it, emitting a misty light. But this one had a blue core, its surface was very smooth, and no heat streamed out of the surface. It looked exactly like a glass marble.

The spell was completed!

Link opened the attic window. Outside, sunlight shone brilliantly. He took aim at a rubber tree about 100 feet away. Then he pointed the wand at the tree's direction, and instantly the fireball shot out.

Bang! There was an explosion, and the fireball flew through the air and hit the tree trunk accurately. Wood pieces scattered in all directions and a teacup-sized hole appeared on the trunk.

For normal Fireballs, the distance they crossed was no more than 60 feet. Even if the Fireball was boosted by a superior wand, the impact would not have been any more than that of a large firecracker, at most skinning off the outer bark of the tree.

This unique Fireball from Link was absolutely beyond the strength of a normal Fireball, not just in the distance it traveled, but also in its destructive power.

The greatest distance it could travel should be around 200 feet, and its power could

probably rival a Level-1 Fireball. If I used the Fire Crystal staff the power and distance may increase a little. The Mana consumption is low as well, so even in my condition, I could release 24 of these consecutively. But the spellcasting time has increased considerably, that's its only downside.

Link could cast normal Fireballs in as little as 0.05 seconds with the aid of the gaming system. But now that the modified Fireball had more complicated structures, and also because it wasn't stabilized yet, Link had to use more effort to maintain its form. He needed eight seconds the first time he cast the spell.

Never mind that. With practice, I'm sure I can do it faster.

The moment he set his mind to something, he jumped into it immediately. He started to practice the modified Fireball just as he practiced the normal Fireball before. He gathered the elements at the tip of the wand and then absorbed his Mana back without releasing it.

He kept on practicing and applied all of his concentration into it.

Half a day had gone by, and the results were outstanding.

Link waved his wand gently, and instantly a blue glass fireball would appear at the tip of the wand. Then, as he lifted the wand, the fireball disappeared. He then waved the wand again, and the fireball appeared. He raised it, and it disappeared once more.

It happened so quickly that no one would be able to believe it. He was able to do it as fast as he would with the normal Fireball spell.

But Link knew that in truth it was still slower, even though it was only by a slight margin.

If the normal Fireball spell took 0.05 seconds, then the fastest limit for the modified version should be around 0.07 seconds.

The more complicated the spell's structure, the more time it took to construct it, and so the more time it took to cast the spell. This was a simple universal principle.

However, for this modified version of Fireball, the spellcasting speed might be slightly slower at 0.07 seconds, but the accumulated energy rivaled that of a Level-1 spell (the difference in scale was almost incomparable). It was also effective from an impressive

distance of about 200 feet, yet the Mana consumption was equal to that of just one normal Fireball. This was indeed a terrifying spell!

Spellcasting speed could still be decreased. I'll practice a little more.

Even decreasing the spellcasting speed by a little bit was still valuable because it could massively influence the outcome of a battle. Therefore, Link would not settle and pushed himself very hard to improve his speed as much as he could.

So he continued to practice.

Link spent the next three hours modifying the Fireball spell. He practiced it until he couldn't feel any more progress, until he'd reached the limit. Link then noticed a notification activated in the interface.

He checked it and found that it was an announcement from the gaming system.

Player has successfully modified Level-0 Fireball. Please name the new spell.

Link chuckled, visibly amused and excited that he had the power to name new spells. He thought of the solid and vitreous appearance of the modified Fireball, so he said, "Call it Glass Orb then. Link's Glass Orbs, haha."

Spell named "Glass Orb".

Player successfully modified a Level-0 spell, 1 Omni point rewarded.

Ha, I even get Omni point rewards from this, not bad at all. Link was even more motivated now.

He now had 106 Omni Points. But because he was still under the influence of Ailing Mana, even if he spent all of his points to increase his Maximum Mana, he could only get to 106 Maximum Mana points. Only three months later would things recover. He didn't need a lot of Mana now, though, so he decided to reserve these Omni Points for later use.

Each point was like a card under his sleeve, so he thought it was wiser to have as many Omni Points on hand as possible.

After he finished reading the magic textbooks and successfully modified Fireball,

Link's mind finally went back to his thesis.

This time, because he received lots of new ideas from the textbooks, he resumed his work on the law of universal gravitation. It developed very quickly, until the deduction process had gone too deep that the law devolved into something completely unrecognizable.

In the end, he couldn't even comprehend the conclusions that his own deductions had brought him to.

But this time, Link's deduction ended much quicker than expected, not because there were no more ideas, but instead because he had run out of goatskin papers. The ink was used up as well. It was time for him to restock his stationeries.

He fumbled at his money pouch, then felt embarrassed of his own situation. He had very little money left—only about three silver coins.

"I need to earn some money."

His pouch was almost empty. If he didn't go out and earn some money now, he might need to resort to begging in the streets soon.

Chapter 36

The Forest Bandits Ordeal

The only way he knew to earn money was by utilizing his magic.

To use magic, Link would need a wand. Currently, there were two wands in his possession: The New Moon wand and the Fire Crystal staff. The former was a recognizable work of a Master Magician, while the latter was a bulky thing with obvious Dark Elf features. None of them were suitable to be exposed publicly.

After careful consideration, Link made up his mind to use the New Moon wand. But of course, he would first conceal the wand under the cover of camouflage.

He then decided to spend one Omni Point to purchase a new spell.

Transmutation

Level-0 Spell

Effects: A low-level enchantment spell. Transforms the appearance of one object into another without altering the innate nature and shape of the original object.

Once he received the spell, Link swathed the New Moon wand under layers of linen rags, completely covering the original appearance. He then foraged some rubber tree twigs and put the thickly covered wand on the twigs. He picked up the Fire Crystal staff and cast the Transmutation spell.

A rippling, translucent ball of light appeared at the tip of the staff; Link pointed it towards the New Moon wand. "Transmutation!"

The ball of light hit the wand. The brownish surface of the rags began to show minute changes as faint lines of woodgrain began to appear. But this wasn't enough. Casting the Transmutation spell once was not going to completely change the rags into a wooden stick.

"Transmutation! Transmutation! Transmutation! Transmutation!"

He rapidly cast the spell five times successively. Now the rags that covered the wand were completely transformed into a plain wooden stick. The stick had many pores, though, so it wouldn't affect spellcasting in any way.

Still, the surface was a bit too rough, so he smoothed it out with some grains of sand. Now, the once magnificent looking New Moon wand had completely transformed into an ordinary looking wooden stick.

There. Now I can use it.

As the wand camouflaging business was done, Link suddenly felt peckish, so he went to the inn hall and got himself, as usual, a long loaf of coarse wheat bread for five coppers. But he thought the occasion called for a drink, so he spent another ten coppers on a mug of ale.

He had been eating the same thing for half a month so his tongue might've forgotten how to taste. A mug of ale would certainly be a nice change.

"Hey, Link! What's the matter with you today?" the inn servant teased as he handed the young man a mug of ale filled to the brim.

Another voice called out from the other side of the room, "Link, you'll soon become as thin as a bamboo rod! You can't go on like that, you know?"

It was the drunkard Tormun. He was a regular of the inn who would spend the first coin he earned on drinks. Once drunk he'd go home and beat his wife. The two had been fighting over this habit of his for many years until his wife couldn't take it anymore and ran off with another man. This didn't stop Tormun from going back to his old habit, though. Alcohol was his true love, after all.

"Say, Link! You're cooped up the whole damn day in that little attic! What could you be doing in there? Come on, share it with us!" another regular chuckled.

He had spent half a month there, so everyone in the inn knew him. In fact, by now the whole town had heard rumors about the oddball at the inn.

Link's only response to these jeering questions was to tell the truth. "I'm a Magician, and I'm working on my magic skills."

To his surprise, laughter rang out through the entire hall in response.

"Ha! If you're a Magician, then I'm a wise Sage!" slurred Tormun the drunkard.

The rest of the hall joined in on the laughter. Link had been telling them the truth many times before, but no one ever took him seriously.

Because of River Cove's proximity to the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, its inhabitants were accustomed to the sights of Magicians from the school. In their eyes, Magicians wore magnificent robes, spent their money liberally, always carried sticks with them they called wands; there was a certain mysterious air about them too, as if they were fully shrouded in an enigmatic aura.

This Link, on the other hand, wore tattered rags for a robe (he had sold the grey robe for money), had a body as thin and frail as twigs, he had the pallor of boiled cabbage. In addition, no one had ever seen him do any kind of magic before. Only fools would take his claim of being a Magician seriously.

Link understood all that, and so he never argued. To him, what the townspeople thought of him was completely irrelevant. So long as they did not hinder him in his quests, the whole town could take him for a beggar and he wouldn't lose sleep over it.

He knew that it was all beneath him. An eagle never concerned itself over the opinions of chickens, so he never bothered with explanations.

And so, all Link did was laugh, then he carried his food to a seat in the corner and sat down and ate. He took a bite out of the loaf, then washed it down with a swig of ale. All throughout this scene, his spirits were calm and utterly undisturbed.

The inn hall's crowd occasionally threw some remarks on Link from time to time, but seeing as they got no reaction or response from him, they just mumbled something to themselves and moved on to town gossip.

Suddenly there was a sound of heavy footsteps from outside the door, as the light flowing into the inn was blocked. Darkness momentarily swept over the room, the change causing everyone inside to be silent. Every head turned towards the door.

Even Link did the same.

There at the entrance stood an enormous brute striding into the hall—he was almost seven-feet tall. His arms were bigger than Link's thighs, his hair was a netted mess, his face coarse and rugged, and his beard bushy and long. He was wearing grey leather

armor with metal plates sewn over his heart and ribs. He was also carrying a war hammer on his shoulder made of pure iron. The handle and its head were eight inches long—it couldn't have weighed less than 150 pounds. But that wasn't the only thing the brute was carrying. On his back was a thick metal shield—it was at least two inches thick, also made of pure iron, and it couldn't have been easy to carry around either.

Link could guarantee that if he was ever hit by a gentle swing of that hammer, he'd be as dead as a doornail.

The brute walked into the hall as if he were a war tank invading enemy territory, each heavy step stomping loudly onto the floor's wooden planks. It was only when the brute was well inside the hall that everyone noticed the two people behind him.

One of them was an Archer, about 30 years of age. His robust physique was also completely covered in leather armor. The other was a woman, around 27 or 28 years old. Crowning her face was a full head of fiery, red hair. She wore a full-body leather armor suit that hugged her figure, revealing enticing curves on a body so stunning she could easily spike any man's hormones.

Every pair of eyes in the hall were latched onto them.

The wretched drunkard Tormun couldn't peel his eyes off of the woman from the moment she appeared. He didn't even notice the drool spilling out of his mouth.

This drunkard hadn't touched a woman for years, his eyes would've bulged out even if he'd seen a sow (female pig), let alone a beautiful woman like this.

The woman appeared to be a swordswoman, seeing that she had a one-handed sword on her back. She was extremely perceptive of her surroundings, easily sensing the drooling Tormun's gaping stare. Immediately she glared at him with her cold deep-blue eyes.

Tormun was frightened to his senses. "Ah!" he gasped, then dropped the drink in his hand. He didn't dare look up at her again.

The rest of the crowd in the inn was spooked as well, and none of them dared to stare anymore.

These three are definitely professionals, Link thought, There's a strong murderous aura emanating from that woman. She must've killed many people before. But I sense

no darkness or evil coming from them, so I guess they must be roaming mercenaries undertaking missions in exchange for money.

Seeing that the inn crowd was completely intimidated by them, they ordered their food and began a discussion as if no one else was around.

They were boisterous and completely indiscreet, so Link could clearly hear every word they were saying.

"There's just no way, no way in hell we could ever fight him. This Viktor scum is a wimpy little wuss! He'd just hide in his little cave and never come out. It's too dangerous if we go in there, it's too small to fit my bow, so I can't aim right. It's just impossible," the Archer said in a tone of exasperation as he took a big bite of smoked beef.

"Hey, stop being so gloomy. Of course, it's a little bit more dangerous than usual, but don't forget how sweet the reward is going to be! And we've come a hundred miles! Are we really going to just give up now?" the woman responded. She then turned to the giant brute, "What do you say, Jacker?"

The brute had a craggy face, but his demeanor was surprisingly gentle. He carefully cut a piece of meat and put it in his mouth, then slowly chewed the food. Hearing the woman's question, he considered it for a while, then said, "We need a helper. Viktor is a Level-3 Assassin; he's also developed Combat Aura. Now that he's on his toes, he'll make a terrible opponent."

"Helper?" the Archer spat out with a laugh, "What kind of help can we get in River Cove? Unless...if we could get one of those Magicians in the East Cove Academy?"

"Gildern, are you out of your mind?" the red-haired woman immediately countered, "What kind of Magician can we afford? Even if we give up all the reward we get they might still not pay us any attention, and don't even think about them risking the danger with us!"

"I was only joking." The Archer pursed his lips, then lowered his head and concentrated on eating.

Afterwards, the three mercenaries continued talking. Most of what they said was about their mission and the mission's goal. The name Viktor was mentioned a lot. But even after half a day of discussion, they didn't seem to come to any solution.

But instead, the one who did come up with an idea was Link, who was listening intently their issue. He remembered exactly where he had heard the name Viktor before.

Viktor, the leader of the Dark Brotherhood, a band of rogues, robbers, and ruffians. The Brotherhood's most recognizable feature was their blood-red masks.

In fact, the bandits that attacked Eliard in the forest had belonged to this Brotherhood.

At that point in time, the Dark Brotherhood wreaked havoc in the western part of the Girventh Forest. It was the most powerful band of the underworld west of Girventh Forest, and Viktor was at its helm. His words held more power than the mayor of River Cove. If he wanted someone dead, one word and that person would not live to see the next sunrise.

But of course, like any underworld organization, the reason Viktor could get so powerful in a town so near to Springs City was that he had powerful political connections in the capital.

Link remembered exactly how far up the power ladder this connection was—the Iron Duke. It wasn't that the Iron Duke directly supported the Dark Brotherhood, but even so, he did receive part of the loot and treasure from Viktor, so he turned a blind eye to the Brotherhood's criminal activities.

Naturally, this made Viktor even bolder and more unscrupulous.

While thinking about all this information, he suddenly remembered a thing called Viktor's treasure trove.

As an underworld leader, Viktor naturally was paranoid about his own safety. He never kept his treasures in the banks of Norton Kingdom. He would instead hide them in a secret location, but he didn't hide all of his treasures in one place, though. Instead, like a squirrel, he would hide portions of his treasures in numerous different locations all over the Girventh forest.

In the game, if a player was lucky, he could have a chance of picking up a map to the location of Viktor's treasure trove. In fact, Link had picked one up once, and as he followed the path on the map, he eventually found 100 gold coins, which was equivalent to about 1500 dollars—indeed a substantial amount of money.

The locations of the treasures shown on the map were random, but according to the statistics in the game forum, there should at least be 20 or more locations where Viktor buried his gold coins.

If there were 100 gold coins in one location, then in 20 or more sites he would've collected enough money to pay the fees for the Academy!

For this reason, Link's interest was piqued the moment he heard the name Viktor.

His financial situation had become truly dire, so he had been listening intently and paying close attention the three mercenaries. Just then, he received a notification in the interface.

Mission Activated: Assassination

Mission Details: Kill the leader of the Dark Brotherhood Viktor!

Mission Rewards: 10 Omni Points

Ah, this is one mission I can't refuse!

He waited patiently for the three mercenaries to finish their meal. Once they got up to leave the inn, he swiftly stood up and followed them.

Once they were outside the inn Link hastened his footsteps and caught up with them. "Hey, wait up!" he shouted, "Is it true that you people are in need of a helper?"

Chapter 37

The Terrifying Power of the Glass Orbs

The River Cove Inn's front door.

...

The three members of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries heard a voice, and they all simultaneously turned around.

What they saw at the inn's entrance was a black-haired youth of about 16 to 17 years of age, with a weak and gaunt figure. He was so frail-looking that he looked like he might actually be blown away by the wind. He was clad in a dirty and tattered linen robe, and his leather boots were old and worn, all covered in mud and dirt.

"Ha!" the Archer, Gildern barked out a laugh, "Young chap, if you want to play house, you'd have to go find your brothers and sisters first."

The red-headed swordswoman did not waste her breath to taunt him, she went straight to rejection, "Young man, this isn't something you should get involved with."

Jacker was the only one who stayed silent. He closely examined Link from head to toe.

Link ignored the Archer and the swordswoman, he focused instead on the colossus brute, Jacker. He knew that this Warrior was the most important member of the mercenary band. If his guess was right, the one called Jacker must be their leader.

"What can you do?" Jacker felt there was something special about this young man. He was too calm and collected, his black eyes were too deep and penetrating—he didn't look like the average person at all.

"I am a Magician," said Link with a laugh.

The Archer Gildern and the red-headed swordswoman were both startled when they heard this. They began to scrutinize Link with new-found interest, but no matter how they viewed him, they had just never seen such a decrepit looking Magician before.

Jacker doubted Link's power and abilities, but he dared not underestimate him yet. He asked, "What spells do you know?"

In the eyes of the average person, Magicians were both mysterious and powerful. But Jacker was far from a normal person; he was a strong Level-3 Warrior, and a roving mercenary too. He'd seen extraordinary things common people could never imagine seeing. So even if he'd never personally experienced magic spells before, he had seen as many majestic and divine Master Magicians as decrepit and desperate wandering Magicians.

Even if this young man's claim as a Magician was true, that still didn't guarantee that he possessed an awesome power. Chances were, he might only be capable of some Level-0 spells and not much else.

"Wait here, I'll go get my wand!" Link hurriedly said. His wand was actually right in his storage pendant, but storage gears were not supposed to be exposed publicly, so he turned around and went back to the attic.

While he was gone, the Archer Gildern pursed his lips and said, "Didn't expect him to even own a wand, I'm impressed. Hey Lucy, wanna bet?"

Lucy was the name of the red-headed swordswoman. She laughed and said, "Bet on what?"

"On how many spells this pipsqueak knows. My bet is that he only knows some Level-0 spells."

"No way, who's going to bet against that? How powerful can that boy be, looking like that? If he'd known some Level-1 spells, he would've been in the East Cove Academy."

Gildern chuckled and said, "Who knows? Didn't you hear what happened in Gladstone? They say the Magician who saved the city was a young man just like our Magician here, but he could cast a Flame Blast that single-handedly defeated the Bloody-Handed demon."

Lucy pouted her lips and said, "Do you think such geniuses are walking about everywhere?"

"That's enough, stop bickering. I think there's something peculiar about this young man, so don't be so quick to underestimate him," Jacker waved his hand to stop his

comrades from taunting the young man further.

The two turned quiet. Jacker was someone they both held in high regard.

At the same time, Link returned from the inn and in his hand, he was holding a wooden stick that should be his wand.

"That's his wand? That's clearly just a stick!" Gildern whispered.

Link pretended not to hear, he walked towards Jacker, smiled and said, "So far the only spell that I've mastered is Fireball, but I think you'll find my spellcasting skills useful for your mission."

"Just Fireball?" Jacker was disappointed as it really was just a Level-0 spell. To him, casting Fireball was as good as throwing firecrackers—in short, it's a completely useless spell.

This was a normal reaction, so Link explained, "My Fireballs are not like ordinary ones. I've modified them with supreme magical skill."

"Is that so?" Jacker was not impressed. He'd heard that spells could be improved by supreme magical skills, but even if he had the capability to modify and improve spells, a Level-0 spell was still a Level-0 spell. Could it ever rival a Level-1 spell?

"How about we go to the woods and test out my spell, so you can judge it yourselves?" Link suggested. He was in dire need of some money, but if he faced Viktor alone, the possibility of defeat was high. But with the help of these three mercenaries, he might have a chance.

He did not worry about the possibilities of getting betrayed by these three at all, and even if they tried to kill him off after the mission, he believed that he could easily defeat them all with his Fireball. Even the Level-3 Warrior was no match for him!

The three mercenaries looked at each other, then nodded. If the young Magician's skills turned out to be useful, then they would gain another comrade, and that wouldn't be so bad after all.

So the three found a clearing in the woods, then Jacker raised his thick iron shield in front of him and told Link, "Aim your Fireballs at my shield, then I'll judge how powerful you are myself."

Link nodded, but he did not hurry to attack. "My Fireball can travel around your shield though, so you might not be able to block it," he said with a smile.

"Never mind that, just attack me with all your might." Jacker's face turned serious, his shield began to glow in a light of Combat Aura. It was an earthly yellow shade, meaning that his Combat Aura was of the earth element; it was excellent for defense.

In truth, Jacker didn't think much of Link's warning. It would only be a Level-0 spell after all. Once, in the North, Jacker had fought against an opponent who purchased a Fireball magic scroll. When he launched the Fireball at Jacker's body, the only damage it did was leave a scorching mark on his leather armor.

Seeing that Jacker was fully prepared, Link said, "I'll start now then."

"Go on," Jacker nodded.

Gildern who was standing aside was getting impatient, "Hurry up, kid. It's just Fireball, so stop dawdling! Just do it already and let me hear a nice boom."

Before he finished the sentence, Link had made his move.

In an instant, the smile on Link's face disappeared and his eyes turned solemn. His whole body projected an air of seriousness and apathy—this was his calm and concentrated state of spellcasting.

Link waved his wand gently in the air, and then a dimly glowing light blue marble appeared—not just one, but two, then three blue marbles appeared at the same time.

The three glass orbs left three zigzagging trails in the air that seemed to move randomly, and they all aimed for Jacker at the same time from different directions.

One glass orb hit the shield, another went for Jacker's sides near his ear, and the last one aimed at Jacker's lower body.

The Fireball's speed was hypersonic. In an instant, Jacker's pupils shrank to a pinprick, and he was overwhelmed by an ominous feeling. This was nothing like magic scrolls. Is this what it was like when a true Magician cast spells? How was it possible for the spellcasting speed to be this quick? And why did they look nothing like normal Fireballs at all? How could this spell be so nimble and agile?

What he saw in front of him was beyond Jacker's expectation. For the first time, he felt he was in grave danger!

This was definitely not like those firecrackers that he had seen; these Fireballs were out for his life!

Could it be that this is the true power of supreme magical skill? Jacker's mind was trying to guess amidst the chaos. He realized that his knowledge of magic spells had been so limited.

He saw those aberrant Fireballs closing in on him so he gave out a loud roar then raised his shield with one hand to block the Fireball and used the other hand that emanated Combat Aura to deflect the other Fireball that was rushing towards his ear. As for the Fireball that was heading for his lower body, he could only close his legs together and hope that it wouldn't do too much damage.

Bang! The shield was the first to be hit by the fireball. Even though the shield completely blocked the explosion, the brunt of the impact still numbed Jacker's arm.

This is bad! Jacker began to panic.

The Fireball that hit his shield was of no more danger to him, but from the power of the explosion he knew that had his body been any nearer to it, it would've done some serious damage. He wasn't sure if his hands could cope with the other incoming Fireball.

He braced for the looming impact, but the Fireball exploded just a foot away from his body.

Bang! Bang! Two successive explosions boomed, and Jacker felt a gust of hot air hitting his body. He knew Link had eased the power of the attack, and that he was now safe. He heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank you." Jacker felt a new respect for Link.

This young Magician really was something. Yes, his Fireball was terrifying, and its power was immense, but it wasn't the power that was remarkable. What really was frightening was the Magician's dexterity in spellcasting. While it really was just a Level-0 spell; in the hands of this young man, the spell came to life. It was like being hit with a torrent of spells, making it close to unstoppable.

In that moment of confrontation, Jacker could smell the scent of his own death.

Gildern and Lucy didn't comprehend what had truly happened, so they asked, "Jacker, how was it? How good was he?"

Jacker did not reply, he looked at Link and said, "Let them try it. These two wouldn't know real power if it hit them in their face."

Link didn't object, of course. In his plans to go against Viktor, he would have to lead, and the three mercenaries would be his helping hands. In that position, he would naturally need to display the extent of his power to inspire their respects.

Link waved the New Moon wand twice in the air, and two glass orbs shot towards Gildern and Lucy.

The speed of the Fireball that he released was quick, so quick that Gildern didn't have enough time to nock his arrows!

Bang! A glass orb exploded not far from Gildern's ear, and the impact of the explosion hit him squarely. Before this loudmouthed Archer had the time to utter a word, he fainted instantly.

Link controlled the intensity of the energy in that Fireball so as to not seriously hurt him.

"Ah!" Lucy was shocked, immediately she drew her sword, as soon as the blade reflected the orb's light she cut through the glass orb. Link did not control his spell to evade her attacks, he only allowed Lucy's sword to cut the glass orb. Lucy was only a Level-2 swordswoman—it was enough to let her feel the power of his spell, there was no need to hurt her.

Bang! The Fireball exploded right at the edge of Lucy's sword, and it absorbed the impact of the Fireball's explosion.

The power of Glass Orb was comparable to that of Level-1 Fireballs, and the impact of Level-1 Fireballs was comparable to that of a grenade. So the impact from the explosion of Link's Glass Orbs was equivalent to that of a grenade as well. This kind of power was naturally something the lithe and agile professional swordswoman Lucy couldn't stand.

"Ah!" Lucy cried out in terror. It felt as if her sword was hit by an electric shock, it vibrated violently till her wrist felt numb, and she knew she couldn't fight anymore.

Even though she still held her sword in her hand, she knew she didn't have the energy to fight further. Another Fireball attack and she would end up on the ground just like Gildern.

"I lost," Lucy relented. She didn't wonder why Jacker had that kind of expression just now. This Magician's Fireball was truly a force to be reckoned with.

"How's Gildern?" Jacker looked at the Archer who'd fainted.

"He's fine. But he can be too chatty sometimes," Link laughed.

Jacker and Lucy stared at each other, they now understood that the young man in front of them was nothing like what he seemed. Despite his gaunt and frail figure, his spellcasting skill was something the three of them couldn't match up even if they combined their forces.

He's a diamond in the rough! Jacker and Lucy made eye contact, and both sensed from each other's eyes that the other had the same thought.

"Now, let's talk strategies," Link smiled, his arms waving gently, and the wand danced deftly in his hand.

Chapter 38

Let's Charge in!

The Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had given in to Link, and once the Archer Gildern came to, they would be on the move at once.

Jacker had previously done some investigating for the mission, and their destination was the north-western part of the Girventh forest called the Cove of Echoes.

As they journeyed, Jacker briefed Link on the situation they'd be facing from the intel he gathered.

"Dark Brotherhood members will be guarding the cove entrance, patrolling the surrounding hundred yards. There's a cave in there, which, according to the information we gathered, is Viktor's usual hideout spot. Several bodyguards surround him inside the cave, each of them an elite member of the Brotherhood, highly skilled in combat."

"Do you guys know how many people we'll be facing?" Link asked.

"There should be at least 60 patrolling the cove. I'm not certain about the bodyguards inside the cave, but there shouldn't be less than 30 of them," Jacker explained, "We're only four people, so storming straight into the lion's den might be a bad idea. Our original plan was to keep watch at the cove mouth. Viktor is the leader of the Dark Brotherhood; people like that can't just hide in a cave forever. He must come out eventually, and when that happens, we'll ambush and kill him."

"Except we've been lying in wait for a fortnight and we haven't seen his shadow once." Gildern's hands were held out, his face a picture of dejection.

Link felt he was still left in the dark about some key things, so he asked the most eloquent one out of the three, Lucy, "What exactly is the story here?"

So Lucy explained every detail from the beginning to the end, and now things started to make sense to Link.

As it turned out, the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had originated from the North, but ever since the Dark Elfs attacked the city of Gladstone, Jacker, who was the leader, felt it wouldn't be safe to stay there. There was a very high possibility that they would encounter the Dark Elf army, and those bloodthirsty creatures had never shown any sympathy towards humans before. They'd kill you the moment they saw you, no questions asked.

As things stood, they'd be sticking their necks out tempting fate if they stayed there, so they moved south.

Just 20 days' prior, the three reached Girventh Forest. They then later received a mission from the River Cove Town Hall. Afterwards, they nosed around for a bit and gathered roughly enough information and decided to keep watch at the Cove of Echoes.

But in the end, the ambush was a fruitless effort. For two weeks, they hadn't seen a single trace of Viktor.

Link tapped his forehead lightly with the tip of his wand. He thought deeply for a while, and not long after he came out with an idea. "It's impossible for Viktor to hide in the cave all the time. Since you've never seen him come out, it's possible that he's not inside the cave in the first place. Either that, or there's another passage out of the cave."

"Impossible. He's definitely in there, that's his old lair! All of the Brotherhood members we've caught said so," Jacker cried.

"That leaves the second option, then," Link tugged at his hands, "I have heard that cunning rabbits would dig many exits from its burrow. Viktor himself is a death-fearing cunning man, I'm sure he would never trap himself in the middle of the cove. If my guess isn't wrong, the other exit must be inside the cave."

As a matter of fact, in the game, there was a cave in the Cove of Echoes which was a duplicate, called The Silent Mine. The passages in the cave were a complex mix of many dead ends, like a maze. There were at least three different exits. Many players who entered the duplicate for the first time would get lost, wandering in there for half a day and they would still find no trace of Viktor.

And precisely because of that, the duplicate was commonly called the Silent Maze.

Now that this is a real world, the condition of the cave could only be worse.

What Link said made a lot of sense to the mercenaries, and they were all convinced. Lucy knitted her brows and said, "Then the secret exit must be Viktor's most important safeguard, only the most important members of the brotherhood would know about it. There's no way we could ever find it."

"That damned turtle, that cowardly mouse!" Gildern shook the arrows in his hands with fury. He thought of the wasted fortnight when they were waiting at the cove mouth like idiots, braving rain and cold for nothing, and that enraged him even more.

Jacker turned to Link. "Do you have any ideas?"

Jacker had gradually come to respect Link, firstly because of his power, and secondly because of his brains.

Link had long had an answer in mind, laughingly he said, "Let's charge in."

As he finished his words, the three mercenaries stood gaping. Jacker furrowed his brows. Gildern's face wore a baffled expression, if he hadn't learned his lessons earlier, he would've shot out a barrage of insults. But Lucy had a wry smile on her face. "Link, there are only four of us, they outnumber us thirty times over."

Link merely laughed at this and didn't reply. He was thinking of ways to spend his Omni Points.

He currently had 105 Omni Points.

According to the rules of Omni Point exchange, one Omni Point could be traded for 10 Maximum Mana points, but now that his magic was in a weakened state, the effect would be cut down by 90%. One Omni point exchanging with one Maximum Mana point might seem small, but he did have a decent amount of Omni Points after all.

After thinking about it, Link decided to exchange 75 Omni Points with Maximum Mana points, so now his maximum Mana limit was 99.1. He also brought along with him a bottle of low-level Mana potion that could quickly increase his Mana by 100 points. With one bottle, he could fully replenish his Mana, which meant that he had 198 expendable Mana points today.

One of his Glass Bead spells would use up one Mana point. As a result, he could cast

198 Glass Beads, plus he had three helpers, and one Glass Bead per one of the ruffians wasn't a problem. He could also complement his attacks with other spells and combat tactics so storming into the cave was, in fact, not an impossible task.

But Link didn't increase his Maximum Mana limit for this reason alone—he simply had no choice but to do it.

When he thought about it, one single Level-4 Spell like Flame Blast would cost him 320 Mana points. In his current condition, he couldn't even cast one Flame Blast, but after adding 75 points, and once the Ailing Mana effect had subsided, he would have 991 Mana points. Not to mention, his Omni Points would have increased substantially by then too, so he would be able to purchase Level-4 or even Level-5 Spells. What's more, he would be able to use them immediately instead of having to wait because his maximum Mana was too low.

Even if his Omni Points were not sufficient, he would still have one Flame Blast Spell left.

It also wasn't such a bad idea to leave some Omni Points on standby. There still were considerable risks involved in the storming of the Cove of Echoes. If his Mana ran out then he'd be in deep trouble, and if his Omni Points were depleted then he'd surely be finished.

So he decided to reserve the 30 Omni Points he had left for emergencies.

The whole process of increasing Mana points took place in Link's head. Just like that the whole process was all done. Then he smiled and said, "If it was just the three of you then it would certainly be a suicide mission, but with me, it's absolutely no problem."

"..."

Jacker and the other two stared speechlessly at each other. Those words did hurt their egos, but as they thought of the power that Link had demonstrated earlier they simply couldn't argue with him. They had only seen this young Magician use a Fireball spell, but who's to say he didn't have more tricks up his sleeve?

But still, this was just too outlandish!

The three still looked unconvinced, so Link waved his wand back and forth and said,

"It's getting dark, we must decide now. I've got just one life myself, I wouldn't send us all to certain death, would I?"

That did make a lot of sense.

Jacker believed that such a powerful young Magician would not toy with him. "What exactly do we have to do, then?" he asked.

Link had a plan in his mind. First, he purchased a spell—Physical Avatar.

Physical Avatar

Level-1 Earth Element Spell

Effect: Creates a shadow avatar. The avatar can produce sounds of footsteps, can speak and emanate scents. It is indistinguishable from an ordinary person.

(Note: It cannot swim. Do not let it be exposed to rain if you don't want your cover blown.)

This trick wouldn't fool a Magician, but it could easily dupe every single one of those dim-witted goons in the Dark Brotherhood.

Once the spell was ready, Link started to plan their combat tactics as he walked.

The mercenaries listened keenly, their eyes twinkling in anticipation. When Link finally cast the Physical Avatar, producing a perfect double of Jacker, the three mercenaries had not a single thread of doubt left about the young Magician's plans.

...

Just as Link and the rest were preparing to storm the Cove of Echoes, in the Silent Mine, Viktor was meeting a special guest. The guest was wearing a hooded cloak and his hands were gloved—no part of his skin was exposed. The only thing that gave some information about the guest was the blue gemstone wand in his hand.

On the table in front of the two was a pouch and a crystal that emanated a blackish, purple light. Because of the crystal, the cave seemed shrouded in a mysterious darkness even though it was lit with many candles.

"Viktor, this pouch contains precious gemstones worth more than 500 gold coins. That's your reward. What you need to do is to find a way to bring this crystal to a Magician in the East Cove Magic Academy—any Magician who has expressed interest in black magic."

"Yes, my lord." Viktor's hand clutched the pouch tightly, his eyes filled with greed. All his life, the only thing he cared for was money. Once he received his money, he would hide the coins in a secret spot. Each time he kept his money away, his heart would be filled with a rush of satisfaction.

Truth be told, he would have no problems selling off his own kin if the price was high enough.

"Don't let me down, and don't let master down!" The black-robed person's voice was hoarse. Had Link been there, he would have noticed that the mysterious individual had used magic to mask his real voice.

"I will do everything I can." Viktor half-knelt on the floor to demonstrate his solemnity. As he raised his head up, the black-robed man was gone, just as suddenly as he had come.

Viktor was left in awe and respect. What a frightening skill.

He grabbed the pouch on the table and opened it. Under the candle lights, the gemstones in the pouch shone blindingly bright.

"Tsk tsk, a Cat's Eye Stone, Blue Gemstone, Fire Diamond... What beauties! 500 gold coins for a mission, my lord sure is generous," Viktor admired as he looked over each gemstone with detail. He was glad indeed.

Chapter 39

Viktor, I'm Your Father!

There were vast distinctions between the maps of the real world and the maps of the gaming world. Even though all landmarks were mainly in the same position, there were huge aberrations in the minute details between the two.

All Link knew was that the Cove of Echoes was at the western part of the Girvent Forest. But how you actually get there, Link had absolutely no idea.

In the game, there didn't seem to be such lush vegetation. Thickets grew taller than people, thorny shrubs were rampant. Coming from the modern world, walking into the forest was no different from walking into a treacherous maze.

Luckily, Jacker and the rest were experienced mercenaries. They took on the role of living and walking maps.

On the road, it was always Jacker who was leading the way in front, with Lucy behind him, then Link, and then lastly the Archer, Gildern.

This was Link's own arrangement, and he had reasons for it.

He had just met this band of mercenaries. Although they did seem to be decent people, Link he knew nothing is more unfathomable than a human heart, so he thought it wise to be cautious, just in case. Jacker and Lucy were both more introverted, so they were harder for Link to size up. Gildern, on the other hand, was different. He had always been frank and forthright, so Link knew that though he may be brash sometimes, Gildern ultimately had no sinister intentions. Gildern was the only one Link trusted to let walk behind him.

But while he was suspicious of the mercenaries, Link was unaware that the mercenaries themselves had nagging doubts about Link too. This Magician was clearly powerful, and so mysterious too—they were naturally apprehensive about him. They didn't know if Link would betray them, trap them or kill them off after everything was over.

It was as if all of them were pulled taut by a tensed string in their hearts.

And so, that was how the journey commenced, with a tense atmosphere where each side was wary of the other until they reached about 200 yards near the Cove of Echoes.

There was a giant Cinchona tree that was almost 200 feet tall. Its trunk was big enough for three people to hug it without their hands touching. It had a very dense canopy, so the four of them climbed up, hid within its foliage, and spied down into the cove from there.

The cove entry was blocked by a huge natural boulder. Thick vines crawled all over the boulder, and dense shrubs grew at the base of the large rock. It was simply impossible to peer through and discern the exact position of the opening of the cove.

Gildern pointed out to Link, "The entry was right under the boulder, you see, it's right underneath the thickest vines there. Yes, right there, can you see it?"

Link squinted to focus his sights. Finally, he could make out a faint outline of a dark cave behind those thick and dense vines.

"Now that's a hidden spot," Link couldn't resist exclaiming. Then he asked Jacker, "There's no way you could see what's going on in there from out here, how did you figure out the number of people inside?"

Jacker explained, "After a certain interval of time, someone would bring fresh fruits and spices into the cove. Fruits are unreliable because they're too perishable, but for spices like garlic, onion, peppers and the like, their consumption rates were more stable. Taking into account the tastes of people around the Girvent Forest, from the rate of spice consumption, we thought there must be about 100 to 150 people. Then we supported this information with other observations, and we could pretty accurately estimate the total number of people inside."

Link listened then nodded and said, "That makes sense."

He scrutinized the cove entrance, then asked again, "Are any of their hiding spots around here?"

Jacker shook his head, "These bandits are confident no one would find their lair, so they don't have any ambush spots outside the cove. The cove entrance is a different matter, though. Lucy told me she sensed a strange aura around the cove entrance, as

if... as if there was some kind of detection spell there." Link was surprised, he turned to Lucy and asked, "This strange aura, you can sense it?"

Some people were born with an innate ability to sense the aura of Mana. This was not that uncommon, in fact, it was one of the natural magic talents. In other words, Lucy would have a great potential if she were to become a Magician.

But of course, Lucy was only a commoner, she was born gifted, but had no money, and no one to guide her or tell her that she had a special gift. She ended up as just another average mercenary who happened to be sensitive to the presence of magic spells.

To claim herself to be perceptive to magic spells in front of a true Magician was something Lucy was wary of doing, but still, she nodded in agreement, "I can sense it somehow, but I'm not certain about it."

Gildern added, "She's been really accurate, we couldn't count how many times our lives were saved because of her sense."

Lucy gave him a quick stare, and her face began to redden, she felt even more embarrassed now.

Link was not so surprised. Since Lucy thought there was a detection spell at the cove entry, then he'd better check it out.

He considered it for a while, then decided to spend 1 Mana point to purchase a Level-0 spell.

Basic Detection Spell

Level-0 Spell

Effects: Roughly detects the auras in the surrounding area, including auras from Mana, elements, secret forces and so on.

After the purchase was made, Link began to cast the spell at once.

There was no need for the wand to cast this spell. He blinked his eyes twice then Mana streamed into his pupils. A dim white light emanated from his eyes. At the same time, there was a slight change in his field of vision.

Everything in his sight glowed in a veil of light—the ground was yellow, the trees were green, the rock was sprinkled with the bright white aura of metal elements, and at the cove entry, Link could see that it was shrouded with a barely discernible layer of crystal clear aura.

The aura was hardly detectable, it was blocking the entrance to the cave, its light was transparent like the water in a stream, pure and clear, but its edges were distinct—it was indeed an aura full of Mana.

It was just as Lucy suspected, the cove entry was set up with a detection spell.

When the Basic Detection spell wore out, Link turned to the three mercenaries, and saw three pairs of eyes, full of respect, looking back at him. Then he realized, a person whose eyes were glowing with light must look very mysterious, and this air of mystery would naturally have inspired awe and respect.

At that moment, the three mercenaries had completely forgotten about Link's awkward looks when they first met him. They had now completely acknowledged him as an authentic Magician.

"What did you see?" asked Lucy.

Link nodded, "Your perception of magic is indeed strong, they really did set up a spell at the cove opening."

Gildern immediately laughed and said, "Didn't I tell you? Lucy's sense is always right."

Lucy looked glad, and a little proud too.

She had absolutely zero experience or knowledge of magic, but now that someone who truly was a Magician finally acknowledged her abilities, she couldn't help but feel validated. If the news of her ability spread, it could be a great advantage for her to stand out among the mercenaries.

From now on, she could tell people she can sense the presence of magic spells, and that a Magician had acknowledged her gift. She was sure the other mercenaries would not look down on her again.

Viktor was indeed cautious. There was nothing more to observe outside the cove, so Link told the three mercenaries it was time climb down the tree.

Once he reached the ground, Link immediately began to cast a spell on Jacker.

He pointed his wand at Jacker, then a water-like aura shrouded Jacker's body, it moved from his head to his toes then back up three times. Link then waved his wand to the ground beside Jacker and the aura seeped into the ground.

On the ground, the dirt started to move as if it was alive, then after a while, there was a mound protruding from the ground. First, it formed a dirt column, then arms grew out of it, then legs, then a head, and at last the five sensory organs of the face. Each part of the body gradually became more distinct, and when the spell was completed, an avatar that looked exactly like Jacker was formed. This physical avatar had everything that Jacker had, including his war hammer and shield. If the real Jacker and the avatar stood motionless side by side, there would be no way to tell one from the other.

"How wonderful." The three mercenaries couldn't tear their eyes from it. This was nothing close to what they'd ever seen before.

Link pointed his wand at the cove entrance, and ordered, "Go, march into the cove in a defensive stance."

The newly created Jacker then turned around, raised his shield in front of his body, then, with an expressionless face and without any fear or apprehension, marched into the cove.

At the same time, Link told Jacker and the rest, "Let's go, we'll wait at the cove entry, and once the avatar attracts the attention of the bandits, we'll make our move!"

This was their careful plan, and in this plan, each of them had distinct responsibilities.

Link was the sharpest spear in the team, so he was responsible for killing the opponents. Jacker and Lucy would stand guard beside Link; their job was to prevent him from getting shot by stray arrows. As for the Archer Gildern, he would lend an extra hand in the killing.

Link saw the fake Jacker reach the boulder, then the avatar nonchalantly strode into the cove. Link waved a hand and said, "Let's go, we'll follow him."

The three mercenaries then surrounded Link, and together they stormed into the cove.

On the way there, Link waved his wand at each of the mercenaries. Instantly, a layer of clear aura covered the three's bodies.

Level-1 Spell: Cat's Agility.

Effect: It enhances the spell receiver's nimbleness and speed. Spell last for about 20 minutes.

This was the first time the three mercenaries directly experienced the power of magical boosts. Their faces were full of amazement. Jacker kept waving the shield around, it felt as light as a leaf in his hand. Lucy took long sprightly strides, she felt as if she were flying. Gildern cried out in wonder, "Is this what magic feels like? What a wonderful thing! I feel... I feel as if I could sprint as fast as a war horse!"

They're like three bumpkins. Link silently mocked.

He then divided some of his attention to controlling the avatar currently storming into the cove. He was the one to cast the spell, so he could see in the perspective of the avatar, and also control the avatar's movement from afar.

The physical avatar did not even try to cover his tracks or be covert, he was like a Spartan warrior, fearlessly storming into the enemy's den while letting out a thundering roar.

"Viktor, you little coward! Come out and fight me in a duel to the death!"

"Viktor, you son of a b*tch! Come on out!"

"Viktor, come meet your maker!"

The avatar's voice was booming, it didn't just travel across the cove, even those at the cove entry could hear him clearly. And there was a reason it was called the Cove of Echoes. All sounds echoed in the cove, again and again, lasting more than a few seconds.

"Viktor, come meet your maker...maker...maker..."

At the cove entry, the three mercenaries stared among themselves. If Viktor could still hide in his cave after these insults, then he's no leader of the bandits, but a saint!

When those bandits heard their leader mocked and insulted so disgracefully, they would definitely boil over and go berserk.

"When are those bastards coming out?" Lucy kept licking her red lips, she was all too ready to kill.

Jacker held the shield fast in one hand, and the other hand wielded the war hammer. "Yes, come out, all of you," he said jeeringly, "When this mission is over, I'll boast about how only the four of us managed to defeat the whole of the Dark Brotherhood. If all goes well today, I can live comfortably for the rest of my life!"

At that moment, the cove erupted into chaos, just like a kicked hornet's nest.

Chapter 40

Give it All in One Fell Swoop

A bizarre madman, a ridiculous imbecile, riding a horse alone into the cove then beginning to insult and ridicule their leader—who could stand for that?

"Kill him! Kill him!"

"Shoot him with the arrows! Turn him into a porcupine!"

"Skin him alive! Teach him a lesson that he'll remember into his next life!"

The expanse of the cove was large, and the trees were all cut down. The cove's land was oval shaped, and the perimeter was lined with rows of wooden huts, about twenty or thirty of them; it seemed like a small village. In the middle of the cove was a clearing, and right in the middle of the clearing was a cave.

Jacker's shadow avatar stormed into the clearing and stood there as he banged the metal shield with the war hammer in his hand. "Viktor, get out of that cave! If you've got the balls get out here and let's have a duel!" he yelled.

The avatar continued to spew out more insults, enraging the robbers even more.

Dark Brotherhood members slowly continued to trickle out from the wooden huts around the clearing. They only stood there surrounding the avatar, not one of them making a move.

These bandits were all carrying impressive weapons. The ones nearest to the avatar held single-handed swords and a shield. From the shine, they must've been made from steel. They also wore good quality black leather armor and protective metal plates which had both aesthetic and practical value. The bandits furthest from the avatar wore the same leather armor, but they were holding longbows in their hands, and their arrows were all aiming towards the intruder.

There were about 70 or so robbers there, but none of them hurried to make a move.

One with double swords in his hands walked out from the crowd. He sneered at the avatar and said, "Our leader won't stoop to accept anyone's challenge. If you want to fight him, then you have beat us first!"

The bandit was wearing leather armor of a higher quality than those around him; he also wore a helmet. He must've been a lesser chief amongst the bandits in the cove.

The avatar made no answer, instead, he only positioned himself into a defensive stance.

"Ha! You really are an idiot after all!" The lesser chief went back into the crowd.

There were 75 of them all around the intruder, their arrows nocked and ready. Even if the intruder was a Level-6 Warrior clad in full-body iron armor, he would still come to a sorry end when all the Archers shot their arrows down at him.

Just as the bandits' attention was focused on the avatar, Gildern asked in a low voice, "Attack now?"

Link shook his head, "No, wait for the moment the avatar makes a move. Gildern, your target is the small chief. Kill him with one arrow."

Just after the first wave of attacks came to pass, there would be a break before the next attack. This gap was the safest window of time for them to retaliate. If they attacked now, the risk of being hit by a stray arrow would be too high.

The three mercenaries had plenty of combat experience—their only reply was a gentle nod of the head.

Link breathed in and his whole spirit was calmed. His gentle demeanor was gone without a trace, and now he only looked solemn and still.

In that instant, he focused all his energy and entered a state of absolute tranquility in preparation for spellcasting.

In that moment, everything in Link's surroundings melded together like the flow of water. Every emotion in him was gone, and all he could see and think of now was the target in front of him. The flow of time seemed to slow down; the preparation for the spell was done.

His eyes focused solely on the ring of bandits. The shadow avatar in the middle of their enemies immediately lowered its head and made a move as if to charge.

"Kill him!" the chief bandit ordered.

The strum of bowstrings rang out, and at least forty arrows were shot towards the avatar, his whole body quickly covered with the wooden bolts.

But the avatar did not fall. The magic structure inside his body remained undamaged, and he kept on propelling forward.

The bandits all stood in shock, none of them fully understanding what they were seeing.

A moment later, one of them suddenly noticed the slumped body of their chief. An arrow was shot through one of his eyes and pierced right through his brain. He was dead. The bandits grew even more alarmed.

Did someone misaim and shoot the chief instead? But they were shooting at such a small distance, how could anyone make such a stupid mistake? the bandit thought to himself.

Then, suddenly, rapid successions of explosions resounded throughout the cove.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

After each explosion, an Archer would fall.

The faces of these Archers were a horrifying mess of flesh and blood. Their noses, eyes, and lips were an indistinguishable muddle—they were completely destroyed.

Such a frightening attack came from nowhere, and the bandits began to panic. Each of them suspiciously eyed left and right for the unseen perpetrator.

After about two seconds, the most perceptive of them identified the attackers' location. The assailants were hiding behind a wooden hut—there were four of them. Behind a huge figure who looked very familiar, a quick series of fireballs flew out. There were close to 20 fireballs released within a single second, each one aiming at a different Archer.

In just two seconds, 40 small balls of fire shot out and exploded on impact. Immediately afterward, all of the Archers fell, their faces totally obliterated. It was clear by the looks of it that not one of them survived.

After the Gladstone experience, Link was accustomed to sights of blood, murder, and death. He felt no mercy for these bandits either; they were just villains anyway!

The Archers were all dead and only the bandits with swords and shields were left standing. Now they had no means of long-range attacks.

"What the hell just happened?" one robber said out loud.

The pupils of the mercenaries shrank in size at the horrifying sight before them; they were simply dumbfounded.

In their eyes, they saw the tough Archers drop one by one like flies, like rows of wheat cut down by the scythe of the God of Death himself, each death insignificant and meaningless.

Was this how magic really was? Was this how powerful Magicians truly were?

Even though Link had explained that if he was given two seconds to cast his spells he could eliminate all of their strongest enemies, they still weren't prepared for the gruesome sight. It left a huge impact on the three mercenaries. It was just dreadful!

"Go! Charge forward!" Link whispered urgently. In his head he was thinking about how tedious low-level spells were. With higher level spells, such as a Level-4 Lightning Storm or a Level-4 Flame Blast, facing that many opponents wouldn't be an issue.

Jacker charged forward without thinking, Lucy and Gildern followed him. Like the bandits, they were scared out of their minds.

The bandits quickly came to their senses, however.

"It's a Magician! Take cover!" someone amongst the robbers shouted. But just as he finished his words, a dim glass orb shot through and hit the bandit's face, leaving a beautiful but deadly trail of light.

Bang! The crash was so loud that it could topple over a large tree. Just like that the bandit's face was blown clean off.

Without a sound, the bandit fell to the ground.

The other robbers were so shocked they were stunned motionless. They covered their faces with their shields and cowered themselves away from Link in terror. Some of them ran towards the huts, some towards caves in deeper parts of the cove, all to escape the terrifying attack.

The events went just as Link had expected. He had chosen to use the spells to scare the bandits and make them panic.

In two seconds, he cast 40 glass orbs, each one hitting its target accurately. Link felt tired from his mental exertion; his head started to ache, so he had to decrease his spellcasting speed.

But even so, in one second he still managed to cast seven to ten fireballs.

To ensure that his mental fortitude wasn't damaged any further, these fireballs were only aimed to hit the body of the bandits, rather than using more energy to focus on headshots. Even if it didn't kill them, that was okay because the orbs could deal some serious damage, enough so to render them motionless.

Gildern would then shoot an arrow at them, finishing off the already injured bandit.

The panicked robbers did not retaliate much, instead, they were too busy frantically hiding and attempting to escape. But no matter how fast they were, their feet couldn't match the speed of Link's spells. Having already lost 40 of their Archers, there were just 35 of them left.

Five seconds later, the last bandit running towards the cave fell as the back of his neck was hit by Link's glass bead, and his head was blown off his shoulders.

The cove quickly returned to its normal calmness. A gentle breeze flowing through the air bringing with it the heavy stench of blood. The whole cove had become a mass grave.

Jacker gulped nervously, and Lucy was silent and deep in thought.

"Just what kind of creature have we gotten ourselves mixed up with here?" Gildern muttered under his breath.

They had been mercenaries for many years, so it's not that they'd never seen a Magician cast spells before. In fact, they had worked with a wandering Magician's Apprentice once. They'd relied on him to open locked doors, but that Magician needed at least three seconds to cast a simple spell like Candle Light. At that time, the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries thought that this was how all Magicians worked. But now, their initial impressions had been turned upside down.

Link's skills in magic were so powerful that in the moment it took to utter the words of the spell a life was instantaneously destroyed. It was unnervingly fast; it churned their stomachs in fear.

Could I ever survive being hit by such an attack? the three mercenaries asked themselves.

They were sure they couldn't, not even if they were prepared for it.

As he saw the three standing idly at the mouth of the cave, Link furrowed his brows and said sharply, "What are you waiting for? Get inside the cave before Viktor escapes!"

"Eh? Ah, right!" Jacker quickly snapped out of it and was the first to storm into the cave.

Link followed him, and then Lucy and Gildern.

Link had sensed their fear of his magic, so in a low voice, Link said, "I'm a bit tired right now, I need to rest for a few minutes. I'll leave the rest up to you all."

Showing your weakness at the right time can calm others.

As expected, the three mercenaries noticeably relaxed as soon as Link said that. Their clumsy movements had become sharper.

He's just a normal person, after all, the three simultaneously thought.

Nonetheless, this did not make them respect him any less, in fact, they respected him even more now. Not only did he eliminate the biggest threats of the mission at the cave entrance, he had also geared them up with magic buffs. If they still couldn't deal with the bandits in the cave, then they'd better not call themselves the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries anymore.

They' weren't too shabby themselves after all!

.....

Just as the shadow avatar stormed into the cove, the crystal in Viktor's room glowed with a dim red light. The magic crystal that Viktor had spent a fortune on had worked just as expected.

Red light, that meant intruders. The light was very dim, signifying that the number of intruders was small, probably less than ten.

Some mercenaries too greedy for money to fear for their lives, probably, Viktor thought amusedly.

Viktor didn't bother to move from his chair, he just sat there and continued to sort out his papers.

As the leader of a big brotherhood, he was too busy to deal with trivial matters like that. He would just have to leave the intruders to his underlings. He was sure they would bring the attackers to him in a moment.

Whether they brought in a living body or a corpse, it didn't matter to him.

Chapter 41

Lightning Intrusion!

The bandits in the cave had long heard the cries and commotion outside the cove. But they hadn't expected the intruders to be able to get inside so fast. When the three mercenaries emerged at the cave entrance, the bandits were completely unaware. They were impossibly fast!

Between the cries outside and the arrival of the intruders, no more than three minutes had passed. It was so fast that they had no time to draw up a plan.

Facing two strong guards at the cave entrance, the mercenaries noticed that the two bandits were clad in a different armor than those inside. It was noticeably of finer quality. In the dim lights of the cave, they saw that the weapons in their hands also glowed with a dim light—they were boosted by magic!

This made the three mercenaries hesitate, their charging footsteps slowed down at once.

These were magic weapons, and magic weapons were extremely expensive. Not only that, but the power of these weapons were not to be underestimated either.

They'd always known that Viktor, the leader of the Dark Brotherhood, was very wealthy. They'd heard that even his sh*t was gilded with gold. But they never expected him to be so opulent to the extent where he would arm his guards with magic gears and weapons!

Link was shocked too. A real magic sword was worth at least 100 gold coins. Viktor was, after all, just the leader of a pack of bandits—where did he find all that money?

He examined them closely, then a mission notification popped up on the interface.

Silent Cave Guard

Level-2 Elite Swordsman

Main gear: Silent longsword

Link then averted his attention to the Silent Longsword, and the gear's description appeared on the interface.

Silent Longsword

Quality: Average

Material: Hundred Layered Steel

Effects: Lesser Sharpness Potion

After reading these notifications Link breathed a sigh of relief. The lesser sharpness potion was one of the cheapest alchemy potions in the game. In fact, Link's body's original owner had a relevant memory of it too. This weapon potion, made with wild Steelbloom, would cost one gold coin per bottle, and each bottle could be used five times, the effects lasting for an hour.

As the name might suggest, the potion could enhance the sharpness of weapons. For such a low-level potion, even if the effects were small it was still very effective.

Link saw how the three mercenaries were reluctant to make a move, so he assured them, "They're not real magic weapons. Those swords were just doused with an alchemy potion. It's nothing to worry about. Go!"

The mercenaries trusted Link's knowledge, so when they heard his affirmation, their doubts cleared. The Warrior Jacker roared out a battle cry, then lifted his thick heavy shield to protect his body as he charged towards the guards like a bull.

Lucy followed closely at his heels, but Gildern stayed behind to guard Link. At the same time, he kept his arrows nocked, ready to shoot.

Jacker was a Level-3 Warrior; he emitted Combat Aura when he charged forward, his shield was shrouded in a hazy earthy yellow light, and he stood at nearly seven-feet tall. All this combined to make Jacker's assault a wild and brutal one.

The two swordsmen didn't even dare to block the attack, they bolted to the side to evade instead.

These two were Elite Swordsmen, so their limbs were decidedly agile. They could predict the direction of the attacks and successfully escape from being hit.

"Have a taste of my hammer!"

Jacker's other hand held a war hammer. The moment he saw the guards evading his attack, he flung his hammer at one of them.

Clang! Bash! The swordsman attempted to block the attack but to no avail. The force of Jacker's hammer was just too ferocious to counter. With a swing of the hammer, the sword in the guard's hand was sent flying, and without any hesitation, Jacker swung the hammer again at the guard's chest.

On impact, the swordsman's chest was instantly dented, and he was flung back about ten feet. He was dead before he even hit the ground.

The other bandit did not retreat, but he used the opportunity to charge towards Jacker with his sword. Just as his sword was going to cut Jacker's waist, it was suddenly blocked by another sword—Lucy's.

The bandit was stunned, and in that moment Gildern saw the perfect opening. He shot his arrow, then, whoosh! The arrow hit the bandit in the face, and he fell backward, instantly slain.

The three mercenaries worked together seamlessly. Those two Level-2 Elite bandits were both killed in a single joint attack.

This was not out of Link's expectation. These mercenaries had been working in the North and therefore could not have been mediocre people. Those who had average skills would have been killed long ago, it would have been impossible for them to survive up there.

Link saw Lucy trying to raid the belongings on the bandits' corpses, so he urged her in a low voice, "Not now, go on forward!"

Jacker added, "We must kill Viktor first! We can't let him escape!"

Fine, thought Lucy. These men don't appreciate how much these expensive things are hard to come by. Hesitantly, Lucy left the dead bandits, stealing a lingering glance at a perfectly good longsword that lay on the floor before following Jacker into the cave.

On their way, they met with more elite members of the Dark Brotherhood, but the cave's passage was narrow and so the elite bandits could only attack them, at most, four at a time. They, like the guards, did not expect these intruders to reach inside so quickly, so they were all caught off guard and hurried out with absolutely no preparation. The mercenaries, on the other hand, were ready for anything that came at them. Their attacks were fierce, violent and decisive.

When the opposing sides converged, the bolder side won. In a short period of time, the elite bandits dropped like flies.

During the battle, Link did not lift a finger. The only move he made was to cast a Physical Avatar on himself, and so in the cave, there were two Links. He did this to prevent Viktor's sneak attack.

In the game, Viktor was a Level-3 Assassin and the Silent Cave was a dark, dimly lit place. That would certainly give him an upper hand because Assassins thrived in the darkness. Therefore, it would be foolish for Link not to use extra defensive tactics.

The only problem was the fact that controlling this Physical Avatar required his full concentration, otherwise, it might even attack the mercenaries.

Not long after defeating the onslaught of bandits, they reached a large underground hall.

This was a spot in the cave gouged out to make room for this large meeting space. The ground was paved and leveled and covered with wooden planks making the top smooth and flat. The four walls around it were deliberately cut too, and on the ceiling, there were a lot of candles which brilliantly lit up the whole hall.

There was a long table in the middle where there were platters of untouched food. A man of about thirty years of age sat at the table. He had striking features, and his brown hair was combed back neatly. He looked to be slightly over six-feet tall and was clad in a jet black armor. When closely inspected, the surface of the armor seemed to glow in a very dim red light. He was using a steak knife to calmly and carefully cut the piece of smoked deer on the silver plate. He took a bite, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings.

He saw Jacker, who was the first one to reach the hall. He was unperturbed, though. He even waved his hand and greeted them, his face impassive and expressionless,

"Hello, there. You people sure are quick."

News of these intruders had reached him from the bandits outside.

"Who are you?" Jacker stood at the hall entrance, thoroughly scrutinizing the opponent.

"Me? I'm Grinth, the biggest and strongest Warrior to serve our leader Viktor." As he said it, Grinth's free hand reached for a white handkerchief, which he used to carefully wipe his lips and the grease on his fingers. Then, he took his time donning the thick leather gloves that were on the table.

These mannerisms were typical of nobility. Grinth's great-grandfather had been a knight, so he declared himself to be a noble and took great care to act in a particular way that he saw befitting of his class.

He was exceedingly confident too. He knew that with his strength and his magical gear, no one in the western part of the Girvent Forest could ever defeat him!

When he was done with his grooming, he then picked up the double-handed heavy sword that was lying on the table.

It was a black sword with blood-red lines running through the length of the sword's blade. Like Grinth's armor, the whole sword emitted a dim red light, and it looked terrifying.

Link peered through behind Jacker, and on the interface, a notification about the opponent appeared.

Grinth

The Dark Brotherhood's Number One Warrior

Level-3 Elite Heavy Sword Warrior

Main Gear: Fire Warrior Armor, Blazing Sword

Review gear, Link said in his mind.

Fire Warrior Armor

Fine Quality

Effects: Accumulates fire elements. When attacked, fire elements flow into the opponent's weapon, causing it to be unbearably hot.

Blazing Sword

Fine Quality

Effects: Each attack will bring a sputtering of flames that will cause further damage.

Now, this was true magical equipment. These two weapons probably cost at least 300 gold coins. It seemed that Viktor had spent a lot of money on this Warrior.

"He has real magical equipment," Link murmured. At the same time, he began to use Omni Points to purchase a protective spell—Lesser Protective Barrier.

Lesser Protective Barrier

Level-1 Spell

Effects: Protects from magic attacks. Especially effective in blocking attacks from Elemental spells.

In Gladstone, the Dark Elf Magician Holmes had used this spell to block Link's Vector Throw. The downside of the spell was that it was useless in blocking physical attacks, so it did not get much use. But this didn't mean that the spell was useless, as long as the circumstances were right for it, it could be used to great effect.

Link waved his wand at both Jacker and Lucy, and instantly the two were shrouded in a layer of vitreous light. Inside the haze of light were countless magic runes constantly popping up and disappearing, like flowers blooming and falling, it was a remarkably beautiful sight.

"Go on, his magical gear can't hurt you now," Link said with a smile.

It was true that Grinth's magic gear would be very effective on normal people, in fact, it would have terrifying power. Imagine if your weapon gradually became doused in flames during battle, how could you continue to fight if that happened?

When the opponent's double-handed sword was swung down violently, the back of the blade would flare up in flames. Even the sight of it could make a normal Warrior panic and their courage waver.

But the advantage gained when an average Warrior was armed with magical gear only worked when he fought with other average Warriors. If faced with a real Magician as an opponent, this kind of low-level magic equipment was as futile as fighting a seasoned Warrior with a makeshift axe!

The magic runes that flowed slowly across Jacker and Lucy's armor reassured their confidence. Jacker strode forward, his thick iron shield protected his body, and the aura covering his body glimmered. At that moment, Jacker looked just like the Warrior of the Gods.

Grinth's face changed, he stumbled backward subconsciously, the aristocratic air he had on just now was gone without a trace.

"How could there be a Magician with them?!"

Shouldn't a Magician be hiding in a tall magic tower researching spells? Why is he running around here in a bandit's lair? How could he possibly fight them now? Grinth was completely dumbfounded.

Then barely half a minute later, there was a clang, Grinth's double-handed sword was sent flying by the impact of Jacker's big iron shield. Then he was stabbed viciously in the knee by Lucy's sword.

Thud! Grinth couldn't stand on his feet, so he toppled down, kneeling on the floor.

He had planned to kill them all, but in the end, the magic gear that he was relying on so much was swiftly obliterated, just like that.

Grinth lamented, "No! I can't lose! I am the strongest Warrior in Girvent For—"

Thud! Grinth's sentence was abruptly cut short.

It was the sound of Jacker's war hammer hitting squarely on Grinth's face.

"A lowly bandit that pretended to be a noble, these kinds of people are the scum of the Earth!" Jacker toyed with the bloody bits of flesh stuck to his war hammer. He stood

over the corpse of Grinth, whose handsome face was now just a ghastly mess.

Chapter 42

The Occult Viktor (1)

The cave was still and silent.

Viktor remained immersed in the task of checking his documents in the library. He completely ignored the matter of the intruders.

There were so many documents for him to deal with, each one concerning huge amounts of money, so he had to pay close attention.

Oh, the Broughwell Manor's rent is overdue for two weeks? It's time to teach them a harsh lesson then! And Princess Annie's entourage will pass through River Cove next month? Better tell my brothers to keep their swords then, we wouldn't want to vex her royal highness, after all. Ever since the disaster in Gladstone happened, so many people are moving south now, hehe, what an opportunity for me to earn some gold coins.

Viktor was so immersed that he dealt with each document swiftly and efficiently. He liked the feeling of power he got by holding the fate of others in his hands; he didn't find any of it dull or uninteresting.

He didn't know how much time had passed when suddenly he heard a sound from outside his study. It was the sound of hurried footsteps.

The footsteps are unstable, they must be terrified, Viktor deduced from the sound of the footsteps.

From outside, the voice of his second-in-command Collins was heard, "Leader, we have a problem!"

Viktor was startled, he couldn't make a response. The realization dawned on him as he was able to put two and two together. He linked the problem Collins just mentioned with the intrusion into the cove earlier.

How could those few people ever be a threat to him? Unless, if it were a Level-6

Warrior. But what would a Level-6 Warrior have to do with a small fry like him?

"Speak," Viktor finally managed to say.

Viktor swiftly put down his documents and opened a drawer in the room. In it was a pure black, lightweight, leather armor, the quality of which was very special. Its surface was shrouded in a black fog. As long as he remained in the dark, he could completely disappear into his surroundings and never be found.

This was Catskin Armor, a magical gear from his lordship who gave it to him as a gift.

Viktor quickly took off the normal clothes he had on and began to put on the powerful Catskin Armor. Collins walked into the room and said in a flurry, "There are four of them coming in from the cove. No one was left from the cove to give any message or information. Even in the cave the bodyguards dropped one by one, none of them returned alive."

"Where's Grinth?"

"Grinth is... he's dead. There's a Magician amid the intruders," Collins's voice was shaky as he spoke.

The intruders were just too quick, in fact, they were so quick that no one survived to even warn the others. Even the message Collins received was a bit vague.

"What? A Magician?" Viktor was surprised. For the first time in his life, he thought of escaping rather than staying to fight. Magicians were too mysterious; he wouldn't dare face such an opponent.

He didn't know why a Magician would bother him, he had always been careful with them. He never bothered the lands belonging to the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, so how did things come to this?

He had no idea, but he knew that the one thing he should do now is to escape and save his skin.

Putting on the headgear of the Catskin Armor, Viktor hurriedly packed up the documents on his table. There were too many of them, he couldn't take them all with him, so he chose a few important ones.

He put the documents into a knapsack and carried it on his back. Then he grabbed the crystal that the special guest previously had thrust upon him. This would go with him too.

That important guest was a Magician too. He would never dare keep that Magician waiting.

Apart from the precious gemstones and most of his possessions, Viktor also packed up a dagger that emanated a black aura. It was another piece of magic equipment of his, a special weapon that was a gift from Grinth who had spent a lot of money on it.

He slid the dagger into a pocket of the leather armor on his leg, then turned to Collins and said, "Let's go, we're getting out of here."

"What about our brothers?" Collins repeatedly, gulping anxiously.

"There's nothing I can do about them, it's too late."

They were just rogues and bandits anyway, with money, he could easily hire new ones. And money was not a problem for him!

Collins nodded and silently followed Viktor's footsteps.

But the two had underestimated the intruders' speed. No more than 10 seconds passed since they got out of the study, and as they walked by a long and narrow passageway in the cave Viktor had no choice but to halt.

In front of them, a giant brute whose whole body was covered in a glowing reflective aura was blocking their way. Behind the brute were four others: one was a swordswoman, one an Archer, and the other two were a pair of identical twins that looked like thin and frail young men. One was Link and the other his avatar, though Viktor did not figure this out yet.

Damn it! They can't have been this quick! Viktor creased his brows.

The intruders were all standing there right in front of him.

The Archer Gildern couldn't hold in his laughter when he saw Viktor, "Would you look at that, aren't we lucky to get here before the little mouse burrows his way out again?"

Viktor and Collins were both carrying knapsacks on their backs, and their footsteps were distressed. Anyone who saw them could tell that they were trying to escape.

Collins stuttered out, "Leader, what should we do now?"

Viktor said nothing. He wasn't even sure how to save his own skin, let alone try to save other people.

Viktor's eyes stared fixedly at the intruders' movements, he took a couple steps backward until he reached a pitch-dark corner. In the thick of the darkness, the effects of Catskin Armor worked, and his body completely blended into it as if disappearing into thin air.

Collins, realizing that his leader had just vanished, immediately understood that he was abandoned. As he saw the intruders slowly closing in, he dropped to his knees, and begged, "Please don't kill me! Please! I don't want to die!"

"How pathetic," Lucy said with disgust.

Gildern drew his bow and prepared to shoot the little coward, but Link stayed his hand and said, "Let him live. We'll dig Viktor's secrets from him."

At first, Link thought he should keep Viktor alive, but now, he seemed too dangerous alive. It's best to just kill him on the spot!

The mercenaries' eyes shone. Yes, of course, this coward looked like he could be Viktor's second-in-command, he must know all the secret spots this cunning fox hid his treasures.

Jacker walked up to Collins, and with one hand he hit Collins neck. The bandit immediately fainted.

"Viktor's gone." Lucy's brows furrowed.

"There was something strange about the black leather armor he wore, I'm sure he must be hiding in the dark. Be careful, everyone. This Viktor is a dangerous Assassin," Link cautioned everyone.

Jacker immediately ducked down and walked a few paces backward, until he reached Link.

"Protect Mr. Link," he urged in a low voice. As a mercenary, he knew how big a threat an Assassin was to a Magician's safety.

Lucy and Gildern surrounded Link and his avatar.

...

In the pitch-black darkness.

Viktor slowly paced around, his eyes were fixed intently on the intruders under the dim candlelight, especially the pair of Magicians surrounded in the middle.

These people had average skills, except that one brute who was a bit more powerful. They must've relied on the two Magicians' power to break into my lair so quickly. They don't seem to have any protective gear on, now's my chance!

Viktor had been cornered into a dead end. He had no way to escape, the only way was to fight to the death.

If I could only kill the Magicians, these three stupid mercenaries wouldn't be able to keep up with me. I'm sure I can escape from them. And once I'm out, I'll definitely remember them!

The moment he escaped, he would put a price on the heads of those three. He was sure that in no time they would be brought to him.

As Viktor was scheming he turned around quickly and looked out for an opening to attack.

But he underestimated the Magician's power. To put it more accurately, he underestimated Link, who was not as weak as he seemed.

Link might have an appearance of a thin, frail young man, but that was only his camouflage.

Once he discovered that Viktor had escaped in darkness, Link spent one Omni Point on a new spell.

Illumination

Level-0 Spell

Effects: Creates a light orb as bright as five candles. Lasts for an hour.

A Level-0 spell costs two Mana points and each spell was enough to light the passageway as bright as five candles. The Mana left in Link's body wasn't much, but he still had a bottle of Mana potion that he brought with him.

Decisively, he drank the potion, replenished his Mana and learned the spell of Illumination at the same time. Then he started to cast the spell.

The spell was the default version. The casting speed was 0.1 seconds. Link cast ten times without hesitation, and on the passageway, he would place one light orb every six feet. In dark corners, he would place two light orbs.

In an instant, the dark passageway was brightly lit by Illumination.

Darkness was an Assassin's safe lair. Once that darkness was eliminated, the Assassin then lost his biggest strength and advantage.

In a dark corner, now lit by Illumination, Viktor who was clad in black leather armor lurked. As the light hit him, he stood there motionless, completely bewildered.

How could an Assassin fight if he wasn't able to sneak up on his opponents?

In that moment, Viktor was like a maiden being snatched out of her clothes in the middle of a busy market. He was shocked and had no idea what step to take next.

"Haha, a tiny mouse under the sunlight!" Gildern laughed. He nocked an arrow and shot it towards Viktor.

Jacker sprang into motion towards Viktor, but Lucy cautiously stood by Link, just in case.

Ding! Clang! Bang! "Ahhh!"

Chaos ensued, and facing Jacker and Gildern's joint attack, Viktor struggled to counter two blows. His body was hit by Jacker's iron shield, Lucy grabbed the opportunity and stabbed Viktor's heart with her sword.

In his cries of agony, Viktor floundered around like a kite without its tail, stumbling and coughing up blood simultaneously. He managed to flee for about twenty feet, then with a thud he hit the passageways' stone wall, and fell to the ground like a bag of bones.

He was no longer breathing.

Assassins simply were no match for Warriors. If nothing else, the weapons they used were of different levels. One used lightweight daggers, while the other used heavy and sturdy war hammers and iron shields. What's more, it was two against one. The fact that Viktor could delay his death after the joint attack was very impressive.

Link had noticed the Mission Complete notification in the interface, and he had received the Omni Points rewards. He now had 13 Omni points.

"That's it? It's over?" The Flamingo Band of Mercenaries couldn't believe it. The whole process of the mission had gone so smoothly and easily that compared to the other missions that they'd undertaken, this one was like a vacation.

"No! It's not over yet!"

Link had thought that the mission was over too, but he saw a black crystal roll out from Viktor's bag. The black crystal was in a pool of Viktor's blood; thick black clouds were emanating from it.

The moment this black cloud appeared, the temperature in the cave passageway plummeted immediately, Link's Illumination light orb dimmed significantly too, just like a flickering candlelight.

What's more terrifying was how life-like this black cloud seemed. It flowed into Viktor's nostrils, and Viktor's body began to shake slightly.

"What the hell is that?" Gildern cried out in terror.

A dead man had started to move again, it seemed things were taking a turn for the worst!

Just in that moment, Link received a notification for a new mission.

Mission Activated: Eliminate the Occult!

Mission Details: Kill the Occult Viktor.

Mission Rewards: 30 Omni Points.

The higher the Omni Point reward, the more difficult the mission would be. If killing just one target could get him 30 Omni Points, Link shuddered to think of how powerful this Occult Viktor actually was.

Even Link was considerably shaken!

Chapter 43

The Occult Viktor (2)

Whatever was happening to Viktor got more and more horrific.

Smoky vapors flowed into his nostrils, and his body began to shake violently. Then, a scarlet gas surged out from his skin's pores, circulated around his body, and turned into a sturdy blood-red shield.

Within the shield, Viktor's build and figure visibly became stronger and stronger!

Link was overwhelmed by a looming sense of danger as he witnessed this grotesque event unfold in front of him—he'd seen something like this happen before!

It occurred in the East Cove Magic Academy, probably half a year after the game was launched. It was also the reason behind an infamous accident that happened in the academy.

There was a Level-6 Magician called Bale there who was caught researching dark magic without permission. He was, in fact, working on the most sinister branch of dark magic—demon summoning. Indeed, when he was discovered, it was right at the time when he was performing a ritual to summon the demons!

The dean of the academy, Master Magician Anthony, assembled many Level-6 Master Magicians to stop Bale's summoning. However, due to the clash of the spells, Bale's Mage Tower collapsed and the elements pooled together in high quantities until it reached an overload, resulting in a violent eruption that swept these elements across half of the academy.

But it didn't stop there!

When Bale was killed, a black crystal appeared on his body, which absorbed all of Bale's blood. He was then resurrected as a horrible undead monster!

This monster not only knew all of Bale's spells, it also had a very strong anti-magic body. When it was in a battle with the Master Magicians of the academy, the strange

monster had crushed the demon Tarviss's seal barrier, causing the demon to re-emerge and escape.

When Link was participating in this mission in the game, he had seen with his own eyes how the Master Magician Bale had been raised from the dead, and it was a sight he would never forget!

And now, Viktor's body was transforming in exactly the same way!

"Quick! We have to get out of here!" shouted Link.

The black crystal was called Occultic Runes. It contained countless amounts of prohibited dark magic runes, and when it was stimulated by fresh blood, it could enable the blood's owner to possess demonic power!

After this occult transformation, the person would lose their humanity and become ruthless and bloodthirsty. In addition, their strength and power would increase at least twofold, and their skin would be endowed with potent anti-magic capacity, becoming a barrier that blocked external elements. In short, the transformation would turn them into a vicious killing machine!

Even though the process of occult transformation could be halted, it required a massive amount of energy, at least as powerful as the runes' creator. But the creator of these magic runes was an extraordinary demon, while the strength of even the average demon was already insurmountably enormous!

In the game, even the Level-7 Master Magician Anthony was incapable of stopping the occult transformation process. In fact, he couldn't even destroy Bale's corpse because the Occultic Runes' power protected it, just as the blood-colored shield is now protecting Viktor's body.

This was because the creator of the Occultic Runes was the imprisoned Tarviss—a notorious demon who possessed Legendary power!

Link was cautious. He slowly backed away from Viktor's corpse while keeping his eyes fixed on the crystal beside it. Then, a notification popped up on the interface.

Occultic Runes

Quality: Legendary

Effects: Corrupts a form of life in the Realm of Light to possess demonic characteristics and power.

(Note: If you are not a Legendary Magician, don't even think about stopping the occult transformation process. Brace yourself for a fierce battle!)

A Legendary item—that meant that the creator was a Legendary demon. Link would never believe that this black crystal that appeared now in Girvent Forest had nothing to do with the Legendary demon Tarviss.

He thought the Occult Runes crystal's creator must be the very same Tarviss from the game!

But why would Tarviss' Occultic Runes be here? Link was stumped for an answer, but he knew that the Occult Viktor would possess an immense power when he got resurrected, a power that even the combined forces of the three mercenaries and himself would not match up. Naturally, for now, retreating was the best and only option.

Still, Link couldn't resist putting up a fight, so while he was retreating, he waved his wand and a glass orb appeared and shot out towards the Occult Viktor. The orb hit the target easily, but it landed with a soft poof on the blood-red shield, not even disturbing its surface.

That put an end to his hopes of stopping the occult transformation process.

The mercenaries trusted Link's opinions, so when they saw signs of him beginning to panic, they immediately and quickly fell back. All of them were equipped with Cat's Agility so they bolted at a high-speed, but as they reached the opening of the cave passageway, Link's footsteps stopped abruptly.

"Stop running, it's too late now!" He felt a sudden change and movements coming from the chaos of the dark aura behind him.

Just as he finished his sentence, the occult transformation was complete.

The effects of Occultic Runes were such that the weaker the target, the quicker the occult transformation. In the game, it took 15 seconds to transform the Level-6 Magician Bale, but now with Occult Viktor, it only needed less than five seconds.

Jacker and Lucy stopped immediately, but Gildern followed his instincts and kept on running.

Link bellowed at him, "Come back! Our only chance is to join our forces against the monster and defeat him! Otherwise, even if we escaped the cave, he'd still get us. This monster is out for revenge; it won't stop until we're dead!"

Gildern's body shivered, and he immediately stopped running.

Just at this moment, the four heard a croaky voice coming from behind them, "You think you're going to kill me? Ha, you fools are optimistic."

All four of them turned their heads around and saw Viktor on his feet again. His body had become significantly bigger and taller and the exposed skin on his face looked a greyish green, a complex web of magic runes scattered across its now metallic-like surface. His eyes were emitting a blinding red light. Anyone unfortunate enough to look into those eyes would be consumed by a sense of chaos, murder, crazed bloodthirst and all kinds of negative emotions. The emotions inspired were so violent that it might drive a weak-willed person to mentally breakdown, or in other words, be scared witless.

This was the kind of dreadful mental influence that creatures with demonic powers could exert!

Jacker, Lucy, and Gildern all had courage, but facing such a bloodcurdling sight, they'd be scared out of their senses too.

That thing will surely kill us!

There's no way we can ever defeat that monster! It's too strong!

In the name of the Lord of Light, is that a demon?

A mixture of negative emotions emerged in the three mercenaries' minds. They had no willpower left to do anything else except retreat and run for their lives.

Jacker was in a slightly better state than the other two, his face was stony, betraying no emotion. But Lucy was now deathly pale, and Gildern had started to shiver.

The only one who managed to keep his wits and composure was Link.

His soul was fortified by the God of Light, so he was much stronger than normal people, but his own personal character was naturally calm and composed in the first place. Even when Viktor flooded them with a fierce torrent of murderous aura, Link remained as calm as a millpond, unmoved in the face of a wild raging surge.

He saw that the three were stunned motionless, so Link calmly assured them, "The Occultic Runes can only double the strength of the body's owner! Jacker, Viktor was only a Level-3 Assassin, even with his strength doubled, he won't be able to defeat you!"

Assassins prioritized on the agility of their limbs; their physical strength was mediocre at best. Jacker, on the other hand, was a Warrior—brutish strength was his greatest forte!

Realizing this, Jacker eased up a little. He believed that what Link said was true, as Link had proven to be knowledgeable many times before.

Then Link turned to Lucy, "His skin was enforced by magic, but I will cast a spell on your sword that will increase its sharpness, you can definitely pierce through him!"

Link had 19 Omni Points and 80 Mana points left. But without hesitation, he spent 10 of his Omni Points to purchase a Level-1 spell.

Mid-Level Sharpness Spell

Level-1 Spell

Effects: Enhance a weapon's sharpness to a high degree. A normal iron sword will be able to cut through steel like butter. Effect lasts for ten minutes.

The Sharpness spell was a normal spell—there was not much potential to modify and improve it. It was a higher-level equivalent of the Level-0 Sharpness Spell, so it was already sufficiently powerful.

After the purchase, Link pointed his wand at Lucy's sword. At once, a sheath of bright white light enveloped the sword. When the light dimmed down, Lucy's sword emitted a clear blue aura—a sign that the effects of the mid-level Sharpness spell had started to work.

Then, Link pointed his wand at Gildern's quiver and cast the same spell. When the light

dimmed and scattered, the 15 arrows in the quiver all shone in an icy blue light.

Link worked at a quick speed. When he was done, barely a second had passed. Occult Viktor was still 60 feet away; he had not begun his attacks yet.

Right now, Link's Mana was down to 68, and the Cat's Agility effects on all of them had waned down. Still, without any hesitation, he waved the wand and re-cast Cat's Agility on everyone. That used up 24 Mana points, so he now had only 44 left.

Forty-four Mana points were not much, but it was still enough to release 44 Glass Orbs!

Occult Viktor saw his opponents make their moves, and his blood-red eyes stared fixedly at Link. "You pansy Magician, you destroyed everything I built! I will catch you and cut out your flesh bit by bit! I'll savor your slow painful death!" Viktor's voice was filled with vengeance.

He slowly strode towards the four, and as he strode pass Collins, he raised his foot and stomped on Collins' neck.

Crack! It was the sound of Collins's spine snapping. He died while he was still unconscious.

Viktor burst out in a bone-chilling laugh, "Everyone in this cave must die today!"

Link ignored Occult Viktor's show of cruelty, and instead, focused his eyesight to make it as sharp and piercing as ice. He was now, once again, in his focused spellcasting state!

"Are you all ready?" he asked.

Jacker inhaled deeply and held on to his shield tightly. "I'm ready."

"I'm good too." Lucy said as she pursed her deep red lips.

"Might as well get it over with." Gildern gripped at the longbow in his hands; he was soaking in a cold sweat.

"Very good." Link kept his eyes peeled on the approaching Occult Viktor, "Everyone, remember, if we kill him, everything in the Cove of Echoes will belong to us!"

That sentence perked the three mercenaries up. Their eyes lit up brightly thinking about it. All this while, they had seen so many valuable treasures, but because of pressing circumstances, they had to leave it all undisturbed. But now, all they had to do was push through this last hurdle and everything will be theirs. It would be foolish to run away now.

They were mercenaries after all! Who knew better than mercenaries that in life, you either kill or be killed?

Once they thought of it that way, bold courage returned to the three mercenaries. They were now ready for battle!

Chapter 44

The Occult Viktor (3)

The Cave Passageway

...

"You little things, I hate your magic!" Viktor's hand was holding a dagger that was emitting a dark black light. His eyes were fixed on the two thin, frail young men who were surrounded in the middle.

Even now that he was brought back from the dead by magic, he still retained a high level of knowledge, and in a few seconds of observation, he clearly understood how dangerous those Magicians were.

He was sure that as long as he killed the twin Magicians, the three mercenaries would be nothing to worry about.

But he did think it strange, though, why in a mercenary band there would be a pair of identical twins, who were both Magicians. The coincidence was just too uncanny.

"Blast it all!" Occult Viktor couldn't understand it no matter how hard he thought about it, so he relented and put the matter aside.

When Viktor had reached closer than 30 feet, Jacker muttered under his breath and lifted his shield before charging towards Viktor.

An accurate charge consumed Combat Aura, required a special breathing technique, and concerted efforts from all the muscles in the body. It released an explosive amount of energy and the speed was very high. It was also very hard to dodge unless the charge was predicted beforehand.

But without any effort at all, Occult Viktor deftly dodged the attack like a weasel!

At the moment the shield was going to hit his body, he swiftly sidestepped, and that rendered Jacker's charge completely in vain.

"You're fast, but not fast enough!" Occult Viktor's voice was full of mockery. His body turned, and then at a speed as fast as the wind, he suddenly appeared right beside Jacker's body. His dagger was like a venomous snake; it easily skirted around Jacker's shield and stabbed Jacker in the neck.

His dagger's speed was simply too quick; Jacker had no chance of dodging it.

If Jacker was alone in fighting the Occult Viktor, he would've been finished off in that one move. This was how powerful the Occult Viktor was. But Jacker was not alone.

As his eyes were focused to go in for the kill, Viktor saw from the corner of his eye a flashing light. He then noticed that right in front of his dagger there was a sky blue sphere of light that glowed dimly.

What is that? The question flashed in Viktor's mind, but before he could react, the light orb exploded.

Bang! There was a loud explosion. Viktor could feel the back of his hands were hot. At the same time, his dagger was vibrating with energy. It wasn't a lot, but it was very condensed; it shook until he could feel a slight pain in his palm, and then it stopped.

It was Link. He had used Glass Orbs to rescue Jacker.

In that slight delay, Jacker came to his senses.

He didn't have the time to celebrate his luck and was quickly regaining his posture to prepare to counterattack. He held up the thick and heavy iron shield with his left arm like a giant iron hand and charged viciously towards Viktor. Jacker had developed this move through his experience in battle. The aim of this move was to counterattack when his charge failed to do damage.

If it had been an attack from Jacker in normal circumstances, Viktor, with his increased agility after being transformed by magic, would have easily dodged this move. But Jacker's body was geared up with Cat's Agility. His body might not be as agile as the Occult Viktor's, but he was still much better than the average Warrior.

Now, he flowed as smoothly as water, his movements just as quick, much beyond Viktor's expectation.

Bang! There was a heavy thud.

I hit him! Jacker rejoiced, but he felt something was not right. Why isn't he retreating?

Usually, hits as powerful as this would've knocked out or sent the opponent staggering backwards.

Jacker looked across from his shield and saw a terrible sight. Viktor had stopped his attack with just one hand on the metal shield. With just one hand, he was able to almost effortlessly counter Jacker's powerful attack!

He also saw three glass orbs exploding near Viktor's face. But this attack, which would've finished off a few bandits, did not even scratch his skin. In fact, Viktor didn't even crease his brows.

Viktor only closed his eyes, and waited for the orbs to explode. He knew that if he didn't open his eyes at the wrong time, he wouldn't receive any harm.

Of course, these attacks weren't completely useless, they did manage to control and limit Viktor's movements so that he couldn't attack Jacker further.

What strength! What powerful defensive magic! Jacker thought, but at the same time, he breathed a sigh of relief. The opponent might have blocked the shield, but it was not powerful enough to overwhelm him. This proved Link's words that Viktor was not unbeatable.

"I can block him here! You guys attack!" Jacker shouted. His right hand swung the war hammer at Viktor's head.

Seeing that Jacker could hold the Viktor in place, Gildern's courage returned, and he shot an arrow towards the Occult Viktor's head. Lucy charged towards Viktor as well.

Before she stormed forward, Link's voice urged her, "Don't try to draw out the battle! Just strike a quick blow, and cut his skin!"

The Occult Viktor's skin had a magical protective power. Link's magic was basically useless to him. But no matter how protective the skin was, ultimately it was just a protective shell outside of the body made up of the elements. If all elements were blocked from entering the body, life would then be impossible. Viktor's inner body could not possibly contain highly protective magic as well. So as long as there was some skin exposed, the glass orbs must be able to do some real damage.

"Understood!" Lucy responded. At the urging of the Cat's Agility spell, she looked just like a genuine cat, rushing towards Viktor.

At the same time, Viktor was facing Jacker's war hammer, Gildern's arrow, Link's spells, and Lucy's sword.

Before he died, Viktor was a Level-3 Assassin. Now, his power increased to that of a Level-4 Assassin. Still, it was impressive how a Level-4 Assassin could withstand the joint attacks from four sides!

Suddenly, Viktor felt crushed under the tremendous pressure. He briefly became careless, and his right arm was cut by Lucy's sword. The damn woman's sword was so sharp, that his skin was exposed!

"Damn you!" Viktor swore, and the black cloud around his body pulsed then covered the stab wound on his arm. At the same time, with speed fast as lightning, using the dagger that was glowing with black light, he stabbed Lucy before she had any time to react.

Viktor's movements were frighteningly quick. The dagger was swung violently as if in rage, and his hand moved so fast it was like a shadow, almost becoming invisible.

Facing this kind of attack, a mere Level-2 Archer and Lucy had no ability to evade or dodge.

She remembered Link's words, once she had attacked the opponent she must retreat, but her speed was too slow, and she had no time to dodge Viktor's attack. She felt the skin over her heart tingle, and she knew that she would be stabbed there by the dagger!

Is it over then?

At the very last moment, time seemed to stop. Lucy saw her life saw flash before her frame by frame—from a peasant girl to a beautiful young woman, and then being sold off by her drunkard father to an old nobleman as a maidservant in the castle. She then sacrificed her body to a knight in the castle to learn swordsmanship, and then she escaped from the castle and became a wandering mercenary.

In her life as a mercenary, she met Jacker and Gildern. They formed their own small band of mercenaries and made a pact that they would earn money together and found

their own mercenary troop.

She struggled her way out of the lowly mud that she was born in so she could one day fly high like a bird, but now, everything was in vain.

She saw the dagger, it had a pitch-black glow surrounding it. It was gradually edging in closer to her heart, she knew she would soon be dead.

Is this where it will all end for me?

Bitter, ordinary and nameless. Is that how it will end today for her, unknown and unmissed in a pitch-dark cave?

I'm not willing to give up my life yet! Lucy shouted internally, but she had no power to resist or fight anymore.

Just at that moment, a crystalline Flame Blast that shone with a light blue glow appeared. The Flame Blast was like a messenger of God, moving inexplicably in curved lines, skirting around the other arm of the Occult Viktor. It accurately hit the blade of his dagger.

Bang!

The Flame Blast exploded, it was as if a hot wave detonated between Lucy and the dagger, blocking it from piercing through her skin.

But this was still not enough!

Viktor's body was geared with very high protective magic. He was exceedingly powerful, a Flame Blast's attack could only block him for a second, a period of time too brief for Jacker and Gildern to rescue Lucy!

But then, Lucy felt her body being pulled back by a strong force. She was pulled backwards at a speed that was at least 50% faster than normal!

It was Link, who used the Level-1 spell Vector Throw on her.

With the help of this spell, Lucy narrowly escaped the claws of death!

"Whoa!" gasped Lucy. Viktor's dagger had punctured Lucy's leather armor, leaving

dark traces on the black leather like that of venom. But right before Lucy's skin was pierced with the dagger, she was out of Viktor's range.

Life or death was decided at that very critical moment.

The prey had escaped and Viktor's efforts were in vain. Not only that, he had put himself in a risky position as well, because now he was in a spot where he could not escape Jacker or Gildern's attacks.

At least, that was what the two mercenaries thought.

But Viktor still had a trick up his sleeve!

The black cloud that surrounded his body flashed again in a violent pulse, and then it was as if he was instantaneously transported out of the combat zone, 15 feet away!

"That's impossible!" The three mercenaries were stunned at the strange turn of events.

"It's an Assassin battle skill—Instant Flash!" Link shouted to reveal Viktor's trick.

Instant Flash

Level-3 Assassin Battle Skill

Effects: Explodes Combat Aura to allow the traversing of distances under 30 feet at unimaginably high speeds.

(Note: Uses up a lot of Combat Aura, do not use excessively.)

"He can only dash up to 30 feet away! And he can't use it too many times!" This warning was uttered by Link's avatar, not Link, to confuse Viktor.

Jacker and the rest were initially shocked, but after hearing what Link shouted, the three instantaneously heaved a sigh of relief.

The terrifying thing was the unknown. But now that they have a knowledgeable Magician on their side who could reveal the opponents tricks one by one, what more did they have to fear?

Jacker had no more doubts; he attacked Viktor with another charge.

The charge cost a lot of Combat Aura as well, but that was fine with Jacker because he wasn't alone—he had three more teammates along with him!

On the other side, Viktor's Instant Flash had just ended. He felt a gust of wind in front of his face and a shadow flew towards him, gradually resolving into a big figure—it was that damned Warrior!

The attack this time was a swift one. Viktor realized he was unable to respond quickly enough. He had no choice but to explode his Combat Aura again. He then aimed one of his palms at the shield.

Bang!

Jacker's charge was stopped by Viktor's hand, but Viktor was not unhurt. The impact from the charge was very strong, and even in his strengthened occult form, it was still quite unbearable. His right arm had been hurt originally, and now it was damaged further to the point of no longer being able to lift it.

"How about another arrow from me!" Gildern's confidence started to grow; he and Jacker made a great team. He fired an arrow that shot past Jacker's ear, bringing with it some of Jacker's hair, and continued to glide towards Viktor.

Having been cut by the blade of the swordswoman, Viktor could not risk being shot by the arrow that glowed with the same blue light again.

He managed to dodge the arrow at the critical moment, but as he dodged, he heard the sound of rushing wind. In the corner of his eyes, he saw Jacker's war hammer being swung towards him again, and on the other side, a longsword glowing with a blue light striking down at him.

This time it was Jacker and Lucy's joint attack!

Even more dangerous than that, the Magicians were casting spells at him too. An orb glowing with dim blue light hit the wound on his arm accurately.

It hit with a bang, and Victor felt pain and then numbness in his hand, and on the stab wound, he felt an extraordinary heat flowing into his body.

This joint attack was fatal, and Viktor had no time to react. Still, Viktor was extremely cunning. He saw that there was no way out for him, so he used his Combat Aura one more time and activated Instant Flash!

But this time, Viktor Flashed not in retreat, but forward, towards Link.

Those two Magicians had been the blame for all his woes. He hated their guts and he was resolved to kill them!

After the previous Instant Flash, he activated another one!

In a short instant, Viktor had reached Link.

"Die!" Viktor angrily shouted as he stabbed Link with the dagger.

Chapter 45

The Occult Viktor (4)

Occult Victor had an insurmountable strength. His speed was too fast to keep up with, and his Instant Flash battle skill was top-notch. Put simply, Viktor had the decisive upper hand in this battle.

No one could stop him from attacking whoever he wanted!

At least, that was what it seemed like.

Moments before, the three mercenaries were driving Viktor into a corner. They could almost finish him off in one move, but in the next moment, the situation reversed. Now, it was Link, their leader, who was in a situation of grave danger.

Jacker and Lucy were the first to turn back to help Link, but they were not able to do anything with such brief warning.

The speed of Jacker's Charge required at least half a second to reach Link, but by then, Viktor would have enough time to kill Link three times. And while Lucy might have very nimble limbs, her speed was still behind even Jacker's, so it was impossible for her to make it anywhere near fast enough.

"Protect him!" shouted Jacker to Gildern.

The battle just now had clearly proven that Occult Viktor was well beyond what the three mercenaries could fight against. If Link got killed, it would mean that their deaths were guaranteed as well.

The Archer Gildern understood Link's importance well. He was ready to use his bow as a wooden stick to hit Viktor with. He knew it wouldn't kill or even seriously hurt Viktor, but he hoped it would buy them some time before Jacker and Lucy could reach them.

"I'll kill you first!" cried Viktor.

Viktor was completely unimpeded by the longbow's hit. His dagger went straight at Gildern, who was an Archer, so close combat was not his forte at all. Viktor didn't even bother to dodge Gildern's futile attack as he was too consumed by the urge to kill everyone.

Gildern knew he had no chance of dodging Viktor's attacks, he thought he was about to be dealt a finishing blow, but then bang! It was Link's glass orbs. One struck Viktor's arm while the other struck his face. Viktor's attack was, once more, thwarted by the Magician!

Gildern instinctively backed away. Now there was no one left to protect Link.

"Ah! You're still trying to rescue other people? Let's see who's going to rescue you! It's time for you to die!" said Viktor, with a malicious grin on his face.

He lunged forward with his dagger and it struck Link in his heart—not the actual Link, but rather, his Physical Avatar.

But how could it be the avatar?

That's because, in the moment when Viktor launched his Instant Flash in Link's direction, his instincts flared up. As a weak-bodied Magician, he was extremely sensitive to these kinds of sudden attacks. So, he intuitively stepped backwards, making the Physical Avatar just slightly closer to Viktor.

In any fierce battle, it would be a natural instinct to attack a target that was nearest to you.

In Viktor's eyes, these were just a pair of twin Magicians, they should both be killed and it didn't matter which one died first. So naturally, he attacked the one closest to him first!

But as soon as the dagger pierced through, Viktor realized something was wrong.

He had killed many people before, he knew precisely how it should feel when his dagger pierced through flesh and bone, but now, the feeling was off. It didn't feel like he was stabbing a body—it was rough as if he had planted his dagger into the ground.

What's going on? Viktor was in shock.

Then, Link gave up his control over the Physical Avatar and the spell began to collapse. The avatar turned into a clump of dirt and sand. Viktor knew immediately that he had committed a grave error!

"Glass Orb!" Link chanted in a low steady voice. With a slight movement of his wand, small orbs appeared in the air one after another. This time, Link really concentrated all his attention on the spellcasting, and in less than half a second, a total of 9 light blue orbs appeared out of thin air.

They moved in two groups: the first flew towards Viktor's face and the others were aimed at the stab wound on Viktor's arm.

Like Gildern, Link wasn't expecting to seriously hurt Viktor; he only wanted to slow down his attacks, giving Jacker and the rest time to catch up.

To maximize his spellcasting speed, Link stood as still as stone. But Gildern thought that was a bad idea, he was focused on one thing—Link must not die. He swung his bow over his back, then with both hands carried Link's body away, and bolted from Occult Viktor as fast as he could.

Link was unaffected by all this. He focused completely on the spellcasting.

Even though the flames could not hurt him, Viktor dared not underestimate the impact of these explosions. The other parts of his body could stand it just fine, but his eyes couldn't bear it at all; he had to shut his eyes. But in the battle against joint attacks, shutting his eyes even for a moment meant certain death and or defeat. The wound on his arm couldn't bear the attacks either, so when faced with the explosive attacks he had no choice but to dodge and evade them.

Still, he underestimated Link's spell. The Glass Orbs were nothing like the arrows; their trajectory could change at any time. When the distance was short enough, there was no chance of dodging these attacks!

Bang bang bang bang bang! Viktor could only feel the skin on his face going numb, but he didn't dare to open his eyes. The only thing his nose could smell was the heated air around him and this made him hesitate even to breathe because the air might burn his lungs.

The stab wound on his right arm stung with a fierce burning pain; it felt as if his whole arm had been burned to crisp.

Under these circumstances, he had no more power to use Instant Flash to chase after Link.

By this time, Jacker had made it to Link—he had used his Charge!

Thud! After Link's prior attack, Jacker, with all his might, used his shield to hit the motionless Viktor squarely on his back.

Ahhh! Viktor's body shook and he spat out dark, thick blood. His wounds were serious and he was now truly incapacitated.

A perfect opening!

Lucy was close at Jacker's heels. Her sword pierced into Viktor's chest from his back. The sword had penetrated his body about an inch deep, but she wasn't sure if that was enough. The sword didn't cut through his heart, but the attack did stun him, so his reaction slowed down considerably.

She was aware of the vast disparity in skill level between her and this monster, so after stabbing him once, she pulled back the sword and hid behind Jacker's shield, waiting for another opening.

But Jacker had no such reservations. He knew that he was his comrades' shield. The only thing he focused on was to stop or delay this monster's attacks, even if it meant receiving blows to himself, and at the same time create openings for his comrades to attack.

He swung his shield towards Viktor, then rapidly pulled back the shield to protect himself. Then with his right hand, he swung the war hammer down onto Viktor's skull.

Faced with the looming war hammer attack, all he could do was lean his head to the side.

Thud! As the war hammer crushed onto Occult Viktor's left shoulder, it made a gruesome sound.

The war hammer was about 170 pounds, and Jacker swung it down with all his might. A dent appeared on Viktor's shoulder; the bones inside had been smashed!

Viktor's two arms were both limp and useless. The strength of occult bodies was,

however, that they had enhanced recovery speed. A black vapor swirled over each of Viktor's wounds and the wound was noticeably healing at an impeccable speed.

If Viktor could just have some rest, he could definitely fight back and regain the battle!

But would Link ever allow that to happen? Absolutely not!

"Attack with all your might!" yelled Link.

This was their best opportunity!

Lucy stormed up to Viktor again. Gildern put Link down, nocked his arrow and shot multiple arrows at Viktor. Jacker kept hitting Viktor with his war hammer in a crazed fury. Link himself kept casting spells, and successions of little orbs kept shooting straight towards the wounds on Viktor's body.

In less than a second, Viktor was completely wrecked under a barrage of attacks!

The occult body might be strong and resilient, but under such an intense wave of attacks, he was finally beaten into a tattered rag doll.

Crunch! Viktor's skull was smashed under Jacker's war hammer. As he was rolling on the ground, his body scattered with wounds seemingly from a thousand cuts, there was no good piece of meat left on Viktor's body.

But even for a wound that serious, this monster still wasn't dead—it was still breathing and struggling. The black vapor still swirled around his body, trying to heal the wounds.

This horrified the three mercenaries. They didn't care how smashed Viktor's body already was, they just kept attacking him in a shocking frenzy.

Over ten seconds later, Jacker slumped down on the ground, trying to catch his breath. Lucy leaned on the cave wall, soaking in sweat. Gildern was massaging his cramped arm.

Between the three was a pile of smashed flesh that used to be Viktor.

"Is he really dead now?" Jacker was still skeptical and worried, so he wanted to make sure of it with Link. The Occult Viktor was just so monstrous and bizarre that it

reminded him of the demons in the legends.

In the legends, demons did not die. The three mercenaries didn't dare to risk it with Viktor. If they must, they would burn Viktor's corpse to ash, then keep that ash sealed in nine different urns and bury those urns separately. They would also make sure that each urn was at least 20 miles away from the others. According to legends, that was the only way you could make sure demons don't come back to life.

Link silently nodded, then said, "He's dead."

He was only transformed by occult magic, his life force still differed from that of a true demon by thousands of miles. There was no way Occult Viktor could survive getting beaten up that badly.

Something was flashing on the interface. Link checked it and discovered it was a notification for a completed mission. He had killed Occult Viktor and completed the mission of eliminating demon magic. He was then rewarded with 30 Omni Points.

And now he had 39 Omni Points in total.

"Now, everything in the Cove of Echoes is ours to take. It's time to pack up," Link reminded them.

That sentence revived the tired and exhausted mercenaries. Their eyes suddenly shone like light bulbs, and immediately, they began to collect their loot.

Chapter 46

The Bandits' Treasures

In the game, whenever players wanted to search for loot after battles, they would either search the Boss' body or scan for collectible items on the map. Generally, loot was raided from the corpses of fallen enemies. This might seem dishonorable, but it was, in fact, commonly regarded as chivalrous, resourceful and prudent as well.

But in reality, the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries exposed Link to the other side of pillaging—the wild side. They were so eager that Link stood dumbfounded as the mercenaries descended upon the Brotherhood's treasures and belongings like a swarm of locusts.

Every single object in the Silent Mine that could be sold for a little bit of money was seized. Even the Dark Brotherhood members' underpants weren't spared!

And so half an hour after Viktor was dead, Jacker, Lucy and Gildern stood on the plain of the Cove of Echoes, their faces flushed, and beside them were spoils piled up as high as a hillock.

All the Dark Brotherhood members were stripped clean of their leather armors—not even the normal members in the cave were spared. All their weapons were grabbed and collected in a pile.

In total, they collected 75 ordinary leather armors, 28 elite leather armors, 50 bows, 100 swords of various qualities, 30 shields, and 25 daggers.

Apart from that, there were 4 sets of magical equipment too!

These were Grinth's Fire Warrior Armor and Blazing Sword, and Viktor's Dagger of Corruption and Detecting Crystal Ball.

The Shadow Dagger hadn't been of much use in the hands of Viktor, but it was, in fact, a sterling quality weapon, and could be worth more than 200 gold coins.

Lucy's face had turned crimson and her almond-shaped eyes were gleaming. She was

dashing back and forth gathering the spoils, and that red hair of hers glinted like a kindled flame. She was acting as the bookkeeper, calculating the total cost of their loot on a goatskin paper with a pen in hand.

"A normal leather armor costs one gold coin, a fine quality leather armor costs 2 gold coins...a bow 1.5 gold coins...a standard steel sword is worth 2 gold coins...all of this gear is worth at least 800 gold coins!"

Even before she finished the sentence, both Jacker and Gildern couldn't help but gasp in astonishment.

"Wow, that's a fortune!"

"I must be dreaming!"

Previously, they would earn about 5 gold coins for each mission they undertook, and that was if they were lucky. Their usual income had always been in silver coins, for example, in an investigative mission, the reward would be about 20 silver coins (about 2 gold coins), so everyone would get about seven or eight silver coins each.

In the past year, they undertook about ten missions and earned 50 gold coins. They were able to survive comfortably on that income, but they were living by the sword, fearing for their life every day. So whenever they didn't have any missions, they would spend their money lavishly as if there were no tomorrow. Had Lucy not been cautioning them, they would probably be penniless by now.

But this time, with just one mission, they were able to make 700 gold coins from the equipment alone! That was an amount of money that they couldn't earn even if they worked for 10 years as mercenaries!

"But there's more!" cried Lucy.

Lucy's heart pounded, with this much money, she could get better gear. There were so many things that she had wanted to buy but couldn't afford, yet now, she could buy them all!

The equipment needed to be sold first before they could get any money. There were still some gold coins around because every bandit had money pouches on them. Of course, they snatched all of it up. Viktor also had his own private chest that Jacker smashed open using his hammer. He found about 80 gold coins inside!

In total, they had around 200 gold coins ready to be spent. The mercenaries' eyes were dazzled by the sheer amount of gold and silver coins.

What's more, every bandit had their own private treasure, gemstones, jewelry, pocket watches and various other types of valuable trinkets. All of this could be sold for some money, and naturally, not a single piece of it was left behind.

"One silver pocket watch could sell for 3 gold coins, and this red gemstone ring could get us 5 gold coins...and look at this one, this silver horse trinket—it's Master Dormick's work, I'm sure it's worth a decent amount of money too. But the most valuable must be this pouch of gemstones, look at how exquisite these rare gemstones are!" said Lucy.

These gemstones were, of course, the recompensation Viktor received from the black-robed man.

Lucy quickly made a calculation and concluded, "They must be worth at least 700 gold coins."

Jacker and Gildern both gulped.

Gildern counted on his fingers, "700, plus 200, plus 700...holy God of Light, that's 1600 gold coins!"

He should at least get 100 gold coins. He wouldn't be at peace keeping this much money. No, when he got his share, he must find himself a beautiful wife and have a child with her. That way, even if one day he died in battle, he'd die peacefully knowing he was not the end of his lineage.

Gildern had never desired a quiet and peaceful life—he loved the thrill of danger, and couldn't stay in one place for long. This attitude towards life is something all three members of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had in common.

After the value of their loot had been determined, Jacker, as the most level-headed of the three, looked to Link and waited for him to divide everything among them. He knew that the reason they were able to earn this much gold coins was because of Link's magic.

Lucy and Gildern looked to Link too, but they were a bit worried that Link might get too big a share.

Link, though, was slightly disappointed. For a commoner, this amount of money would be considered a fortune, but for a Magician, this was but a beggarly amount.

But he didn't regret anything because he'd found the most valuable object of all among the pile—the Occultic Runes of Tarviss.

Link knew the Occultic Runes were ominous and sinister, it might even have demagogic powers, but nevertheless, it contained the most coveted magic knowledge that a Magician could hope to learn.

No one in the Legion of Light would openly admit to wanting such an object, but if it was sold to the Dark Elf Kingdom of Pralync, it would definitely fetch him more than ten thousand gold coins!

But Link would never sell it.

With the level of magic that he was at now, he had nowhere near enough knowledge to study and decipher the Occultic Runes. But in the future, if he kept it with him, it could come in handy one day.

The three mercenaries didn't think much of the fact that Link took the magical runes. To them, all they wanted was to be as far away from such an evil object as possible; who would want to touch it again after all they went through?

Seeing that the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries members were all staring at him, Link thought and said, "Just give me the gold coins, you take all the gear and divide them among yourselves."

Dealing with the equipment would be too troublesome, and troublesome things were what Link hated the most. He'd already gotten the Occultic Runes, a rare Legendary object, so he was more than content. And after all, these mercenaries did risk their lives on this mission, he couldn't let them do it for nothing, could he?

As for the tuition fees, Link suspected he would find enough money to cover it because he had seen from the loot pile something that said "Viktor's Treasure Map".

The treasure map was a thrown about in the pile, so the three mercenaries hadn't noticed it at all.

Digging for treasures in the game was interesting and fun, but in the real world, it was

more of a dirty, exhausting, and dangerous undertaking. Link had no desire to do it alone. He knew that it would be best to have someone help him do the dirty work, and then divide the gold coins up among them. But to do this, he needed people he could trust.

These three mercenaries seemed reliable; they were agile and strong. They might lose a bit of composure in the face of such enormous wealth, but their judgments remained sound, and they didn't lose their poise. This kind of mental strength was not bad at all, though Link still had doubts about their integrity because they had only known each other briefly. Link was also using this opportunity to test their honesty.

The moment they heard Link speak, the three mercenaries looked at each other.

"But Link, what's left is worth at least 1400 gold coins!" Jacker exclaimed in disbelief.

"I know, but it's too troublesome to deal with them; it would waste too much of my time. All of you have helped a lot, anyway," Link said.

"But how could we agree to this? You should at least get 1200 gold coins," Lucy stated without hesitation. There were only three of them in the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries, but it's only fair that the one who did the most work should get the most money!

Even the seemingly stingy Gildern didn't expect to get much. From the total of 1600 gold coins, he would be very happy just to get 100 gold coins.

The young Magician not only enabled them to plunder the Dark Brotherhood's treasures and belongings, he had also saved their lives many times, particularly Lucy, whose life was snatched from the clutches of the God of Death himself. Naturally, she felt deeply grateful to Link.

Jacker nodded in agreement. Gildern had some reservations, but he did agree with what Lucy said, so he nodded too.

Link laughed. What just happened proved that the three mercenaries had integrity. Even if integrity did not account for everything, it was still a strong foundation for trust and cooperation.

Link would never dig for the treasures himself anyway, that would waste too much time and energy. He would have to find someone else to do it, and now that he knew

he could rely on the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries, he would naturally ask them for their help.

He had no need to search for all of the hidden treasures. Once he'd found enough gold coins to pay for his tuition, he would stop.

He pointed at the tiny notebook in the loot pile, then said with a laugh, "Have you looked at that red leather notebook?"

Lucy glanced at the direction Link was pointing, then with slight disgust on her face, she said, "Of course, that's Viktor's filthy little notebook, it's full of his lecherous adventures."

She had found the notebook when she was raiding Viktor's room. It was right there on the study table, so she flipped it open and discovered that it was filled with lewd and obscene contents.

If it hadn't been for the fact that the notebook might be worth a few silver coins due to its fine material, it would never have appeared in the pile in the first place.

Chapter 47

Viktor's Dirty Little Notebook

Lucy wasn't the only one who noticed the red leather notebook, Jacker and Gildern had seen it too.

Jacker didn't think much of it. Gildern, on the other hand, laughed and said, "It wasn't that bad—I never expected Viktor to be that kind of a person, but I liked it."

Lucy glared at him for what he said.

Link just shook his head, "It's not that simple."

The three didn't understand what Link meant. "Mr. Link, did you notice something in the notebook?" Jacker asked.

Link nodded, then asked Lucy, "You found this notebook in Viktor's study, didn't you?"

"Yes, it was boldly splayed out on the table." Lucy nodded, even though she didn't understand why Link would ask that question.

Boldly splayed out on the table? Maybe Viktor was in such a hurry to make his escape that he forgot to take it. Either that, or he remembered every location of his hidden treasure and didn't need this notebook to remind him. It could also be that he was confident no one would be able to decipher the secret locations inside even if someone found it later.

Nonetheless, Link was sure that the notebook contained the maps to the hidden treasures because in the game, this was exactly what the notebook looked like. The notebook in the game, similarly, was filled with obscene details that contained secret messages about Viktor's hidden loot. But of course, in the game, the erotic details had been edited out, so it wasn't as exposed as the actual content here.

Link asked again, "Then I'll ask you a question. Do you think Viktor was a perverted man?"

The three stared at each other before shaking their heads.

From what they'd learned so far about Viktor, he wasn't a good person, sure, but he definitely wasn't a lecherous man. In the whole of the Cove of Echoes, there was not one woman in sight. In fact, the only rumored misdeeds of Viktor's were robbery, murder, extortion and so on, but as for women, they seemed to be of little interest to him. So why would he have such a dirty notebook laying proudly on his study table?

Link continued, "I think all of you have heard the rumor of Viktor's hidden treasures, am I right?"

Viktor had kept a large portion of his wealth hidden away, but secrets were always brought out by the wind of rumors. Anyone who knew anything about the Dark Brotherhood would have heard about it.

The three mercenaries nodded, their eyes full of anticipation and joy. They had guessed what Link was trying to say, but each of them stayed silent, waiting for Link to reveal his discovery.

So Link stopped dropping hints, he flipped open the first page of the notebook and began to read it out loud.

To be honest, this erotic diary was written well—it was rich with details, full of delicate and explicit descriptions and imageries of the women's characteristics. Each page was bursting with lust and desire, and each woman was brought to vivid life on paper.

When Link finished reading, Jacker's gloomy face had become slightly reddened, Gildern kept licking his lips, and Lucy was discernibly uncomfortable as she clamped her long legs together.

Link pretended he didn't see the mercenaries' reactions, then calmly asked, "Now, what do you think?"

Jacker felt too awkward to say anything, Lucy's face had by that point turned beet red, and she stayed silent too. Gildern chuckled and said, "That really wasn't bad at all, now I'm itching to go to the Red Mill brothel."

Link stared at Gildern, then asked, "Did none of you catch the obvious secret message in there at all?"

"Secret message? What secret message?" Lucy couldn't resist asking. All she caught was the salacious content inside.

Alright. Link was tired of giving them clues, so he explained it to them in detail, "If my guess is right, this notebook is a map of Viktor's many hidden treasures. You see, in the first entry, it says here he went to Springs City for a pleasure-seeking trip, but that was a front. The hidden meaning lay in this passage," Link flipped through the pages, "Listen to this, Viktor said he stared at a small stream flowing between a woman's legs. In fact, he was probably referring to a small stream that flowed in the middle of Girvent Forest. He said beside the stream there were three erotic moles, I think these moles are his markings – maybe stones, maybe trees – though I think they're probably trees since trees would be more inconspicuous. It wouldn't attract unwanted attention."

The three mercenaries looked on keenly as Link continued.

"And lastly, he said he fondled the stream between her legs and discovered that something was protruding, what he meant was that at the position marked by the three big trees, there would be an islet in the middle of the stream, and that was where he buried his treasure."

When Link had finished explaining, something clicked in Lucy's mind. "Wait, I think I've seen that place before. Yes, it's about a mile from here. We've walked past the place before, I'd even remarked on how beautiful those three huge trees were. Jacker, Gildern, don't you remember that place?"

Jacker and Gildern simultaneously nodded. It was only two weeks ago.

"Then that must be it. Since it's just about a mile away, why don't we go there now and check it out?" said Link with a laugh.

The Cove of Echoes was a truly hidden place, there should be no worries of theft even if they left everything here unattended. The three mercenaries agreed with Link's view on this matter.

A few minutes later, the four reached the spot where the stream was marked by three huge trees. They dug the ground on the islet in the middle of the stream, and after a while, they finally found a chest box. When they opened the chest, it was full of gold coins. After counting, it was discovered to be 150 gold coins in total!

The three mercenaries felt their heart beating against their chests. This was only the

first hidden treasure and they'd already found 150 gold coins! No less than half of that red notebook was filled with erotic escapades! The three thought of the potential gold coins they could gain in the future and got so their faces turned red.

"Link, why don't you tell us about the next hidden treasure spot?" Jacker asked. He had read the notebook but did not catch any hidden message in it at all. But in the eyes of this remarkable Magician, it turned into something else entirely. An erotic notebook had become a treasure map! That just proved how wise Magicians were—they really did deserve awe and respect!

Lucy and Gildern both nodded their heads in anticipation. To them, they both found this kind of treasure hunting interesting and exciting!

Link flipped through the notebook and counted 18 entries, meaning there were 18 hidden treasures. This was another difference between the game and the real world. In the game, you would randomly find pages of the notebook, but here, one discovery and you find all the locations where Viktor had hidden his treasures.

He smiled and said, "I will, don't you worry. Although this will be the last time I'm hunting hidden treasures with you guys. Right now, let's go back to the Cove of Echoes."

The first hidden treasure was easy to find, and it wasn't that far away either, but that was just their luck. The rest might not be so easy to find. They're called hidden treasures for a reason. Viktor must've hidden them in high mountains and isolated roads—places people wouldn't normally dare to go. Link wasn't planning on wasting so much time going on such treacherous quests.

So, they all returned to the Cove of Echoes once again, and the three mercenaries began to pack up their loot. They put them in linen sacks, then dealt with the bandits' corpses.

They had no means of digging a trench big enough to bury all of the bandits, so they burnt the bodies, including the smashed and destroyed body of Viktor's. He had been transformed by demonic magic and the mercenaries wouldn't be at peace until they burnt his body.

The three mercenaries had completely forgotten all about the rewards from the River Cove town council. Only fools would make it known that they'd defeated the Dark

Brotherhood, though. It's best that they kept the whole incident to themselves. If news of their deeds spread, people would know that they had Viktor's treasure maps, and that would get them into a lot of trouble with people who wanted to get their hands on the map. And so they all agreed that this whole quest of theirs should be forever kept as a secret.

At this point, Link had deciphered all of the hidden messages in the notebook. Some of them were truly obscure and hard to decode, but for Link it was hardly any problem at all. He only had to read it a few times before Viktor's hidden message was clear to him.

Link wrote everything down and gave the notebook to Jacker, "If each of these hidden treasures contains 150 gold coins, then there must be at least about 2700 gold coins in total."

2700 gold coins. Add that to the 1400 gold coins they obtained previously, and that was 4100 gold coins in total—truly a fortune. Link knew that his father, although a viscount, would never be able to fork out that much money. Even if he sold all his properties, he would still have only about 1000 gold coins. The rumors about Viktor's great wealth was true indeed!

The three mercenaries' eyes widened. That was an amount of money they couldn't even imagine!

After a long pause, Jacker was the first to break the silence. "Link, how do you plan on dividing it?"

Lucy and Gildern both looked at Link too, their eyes were full of both anticipation and unease. They had nothing else on their minds right now other than the hope that Link would let them have a nice chunk of the share.

Link already had a plan in mind. He said, "I don't have the time to hunt for the hidden treasures, so I'll just rely on the three of you. Once you've found them, you could give me 1500 gold coins. Then when my magic skills are good enough, I would provide each of you with fine quality magic gear for free. Of course, you may choose not to give me those 1500 gold coins. In that case, I'll just take these 200 gold coins now, and we'll part ways from here." He was a nobleman's son—1500 gold coins were enough for his tuition fees.

Link remained as calm and composed as he ever was when talking about the matter of the share. He didn't seem to appreciate what a fortune 1500 gold coins actually was. It seemed that, to Link, it didn't matter whether he would get the money or not. He would be fine either way.

And that wasn't so far from the truth. Even if he had a treasure map, he wouldn't trouble himself with the task of hunting for those treasures. His whole focus right now was on his thesis of magic. He didn't want to waste a single minute not working on it, much less, devote so much time and energy to the pursuit of gold coins.

If it hadn't been for the tuition fees, he wouldn't have even bothered with the Dark Brotherhood in the first place. But now that he had completed the mission, he couldn't just give all the loot and rewards away, so he played a trick on the mercenaries, and used fine quality magic gear as the waiver.

In truth, integrity was, of course, important, but to let the success of a mission, especially one that comes with a lot of money like this one, hang upon the honesty of the people in your team was simply foolish and would most probably entice your team member's betrayal!

Integrity could be tested, but if it was tested with such alluring temptation, it might easily be broken too!

A really good plan would be to rely on people who were morally honest and then tempt them with rewards. That would guarantee a higher chance of success.

Link was sure that the three mercenaries were tempted by the offer of 1500 gold coins in exchange for three fine quality magic gears tailor-made by the Magician himself.

Tailor-made fine quality magic gear would definitely give them the upper hand in battles. This was an advantage that even money couldn't buy!

As for the question of Link's magic skills, Jacker and the rest had no doubts that he could, one day, be good enough to do it. He was such a powerful Magician even at such a young age. How much more powerful would he be years from now?

They'd fought with Link, so they had no doubts about his integrity. If he really was just after the money, Link could easily kill them off now with his spells and take everything for himself.

The three mercenaries discussed among themselves quietly for a while, then Jacker stood up and put the 300 gold coins and the 100 gold coins from the hidden chest into a money bag and gave it to Link. Then he promised, "Mr. Link, we promise you that we will send the 1500 gold coins to you as fast as we can!"

"I will be at the River Cove inn." Link didn't touch the money bag, instead, he used Magician's Hand to lift it for him because it was quite heavy.

"Farewell, then. And good luck." Link turned around and walked out of the Cove of Echoes, the money bag mysteriously floating a few feet away from him along the way.

When he exited the Cove of Echoes, the three mercenaries felt they had seen and experienced such bizarre and wonderful things in just one day.

"Jacker, are you sure it's a good idea to give him 1500 gold coins?" Gildern felt some hesitation.

Lucy immediately glared at him and said, "You idiot! That young man will surely become a powerful Magician one day. He may be short of money now, but that makes it the perfect opportunity for us to get on his good side! Or do you plan on being a mediocre mercenary for the rest of your life?"

Jacker nodded. "Lucy's right. We can't stay as a small Flamingo Band of Mercenaries forever. I want us to expand and become a big mercenary group, one that rivals even the Thorn of Glory Mercenary Troop from the North!"

"Fine, give him the money then." Gildern shrugged. For some reason, he still felt uncomfortable and was troubled by the loss of 1500 gold coins to the Magician.

On the other hand, the moment Link came out of the Cove of Echoes, he immediately put the money bag in his storage pendant. He only took out five or six gold coins to spend on his necessities. He was feeling jolly and was whistling while strolling back to River Cove town.

He believed in his own judgment, he was sure that the three mercenaries would send him the gold coins. Even if they didn't find enough gold coins from the hidden treasures, he was sure they would find another way to get them for him.

This was because he saw the fire he ignited in their eyes when he mentioned the magic equipment. He knew how much they strived to be better mercenaries!

With that, he was sure that the matter of his tuition was finally settled.

Chapter 48

An Unprecedented Question!

Link returned to the River Cove Inn and tossed a stack of about thirty copper coins in the direction of the inn servant. The servant stared at him in alarm. Link laughed and said, "Three pieces of oatmeal bread with butter and a cup of milk, sent to my room, please."

He now had 300 gold coins in his pouch and he could afford a nice meal. There was no need to overindulge, though, since his body didn't need a lot of food to subsist. A small meal would suffice.

"So, you're rich now, Link?" the inn servant joked.

Link chuckled but explained nothing. He went back up to the attic. While waiting for his food to be served, he took the goatskin papers which contained his thesis from his pendant and then by sheer force of habit checked it for any mistakes.

It turned out that his thesis wasn't bad at all. What he had written was a basic paper that had omitted nothing essential. The edited parts had smooth flowing logic and elegance; the whole thing even had an ineffable sense of beauty that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Even as the author himself, as Link pored over the thesis a sense of incredulity arose. Did I really write this? Or did the God of Light borrow my hands to do it?

This might be the case, but even so, Link didn't take it to heart. To compare himself to a supreme being in a higher plane of existence was simply a foolish thing to do.

Not long after, the food was sent to his room. Link savored each bite and he soon felt reinvigorated. Then, he slipped out the new goatskin papers he bought and continued working on this thesis.

His recent exploit in the Cove of Echoes had possibly transformed his brain because when he began to re-write his thesis, Link discovered that he had a torrent of new ideas. Soon after, he was completely immersed in the task.

This time, he had secured enough gold coins and, so, was not interrupted by thoughts of materialistic woes. He freely spent his whole day writing the thesis and working on his spells.

One week later, Link had already improved three Level-0 spells: Earth Spike, Illumination, and Mud Marsh.

After improving these three spells, Link renamed them as: Spiral Spike, Spark, and Sticky Marsh. These three spells only used up one Mana point. The scale of the spells decreased, but their energy was condensed to the level comparable to that of Level-1 spells. When combined with Link's accuracy, these spells could develop shocking levels of power.

However, after having improved these spells, Link lost all interest in Level-0 spells. Magic of this level was just too simple for him now; it posed absolutely no challenge to him and he now yearned for a more advanced knowledge of magic.

And so, his heart was even more set to get into the East Cove Magic Academy.

What was left was the thesis. Link's determination was as strong as steel, once he set out to do something, he would make sure that he finished it. So, he continued to work on his paper and in his spare time, he would write letters to Eliard. Lately, the questions he asked Eliard in the letters were becoming more and more complicated.

Link himself did not notice this change. He was unaware that the questions he asked had surpassed the level of a Magician's Apprentice.

While Link buried himself in the task of writing his thesis, Eliard received Link's letter. He could only shake his head in bafflement after reading it since out of all the questions Link asked this time he could only understand one. The rest was all an enigma to him.

I give up, I'll just ask the tutor. Eliard copied the question in the letter on a goatskin paper, then climbed the spiral staircase up the Magic Tower until he reached the big hall on the top floor where his tutor resided.

His tutor, Moira, had a sweet and gentle character, except when in class. The fact that she didn't like to be disturbed in her spare time was a common knowledge among the students in the Magic Tower. But the rule did not apply to Eliard.

He could find Moira any time he pleased, to ask her anything he didn't understand or had doubts about. In the beginning, Eliard felt uncomfortable about this, but after Moira's insistence, he gradually became more at ease about it.

Now, he would go straight to Moira whenever there were any questions. And that was what he was doing now.

When he reached the door, he knocked. "Tutor, may I come in?" he said to the Sonicator on the door.

Just as he had finished his sentence, he heard a soft click sound. The magic runes on the door glowed in a dim light and the door opened automatically.

This indicated that the tutor had given him permission to go inside.

As he pushed the door and walked in, there was another click coming from behind him and the door automatically closed. Eliard was now used to all this.

Behind the room door was a wall, and on the wall, there was a colorful painting. This wall completely blocked the view of the hall behind it. On two sides of the wall were passages that entered the large hall. As Eliard walked in, he found himself in a round hall of about 50 feet in diameter. In the middle there was a luxurious set of furniture and the floor was covered in luscious camel fur carpet. Glass windows surrounded the hall, and the glass of the windows was inlaid with precious crystals.

Rays of light shone in through the windows, making the big hall look spacious and airy. Picturesque views around the East Cove made themselves present through the inlaid crystals. Bookshelves lined the walls, and they were packed with rows and rows of books. In front of one bookshelf sat a lady Magician of around 30 years old, reading a book about magic.

She was Eliard's tutor, Moira.

Moira was a Level-5 Magician, age 35. She was the academy dean's proud student and East Cove Magic Academy's top genius.

She had a head full of lustrous blonde hair and her body emanated a thick aura of magic as if she was emanating light. She was wearing a deep blue Magician's robe with silver linings and she was comfortably settled down in a chair quietly reading her book. She was calm and relaxed; sunshine was scattered through the crystals, shining

a shimmering light on Moira's delicate features, making her look impalpably elegant.

But Eliard was completely oblivious and unmoved by all this. There was nothing in his mind except magic, and this lady in front of him was just a tutor that he respected.

"Tutor," he calmly said,

Moira nodded and put the book in her hands on the table. Her eyes looked at the goatskin papers in Eliard's hands, and then she cheerfully asked, "What's the question this time?"

She took special notice of this student because she saw the persistence in this young man that was just like hers in the past.

Eliard walked up to her and handed over the scrolls.

Moira unrolled the goatskin paper and attentively read the contents, but after glancing at it, her eyes froze. "You've progressed so far, are you at this level now?" she remarked with surprise.

As a Level-5 Magician, she could see that these questions were very advanced. For someone to be able to ask these questions, their basic understanding of magic theory had to be rock solid.

On the scroll there were six questions, she perused through it once, and found that she could only instantly answer two of them, for the other four, she had to carefully consider it first.

"What excellent questions!" Moira couldn't help exclaiming.

For a Magician of her level, she didn't concern herself much about whether her students were working hard enough because if they didn't work hard, they wouldn't be able to become her students in the first place. Instead, she paid close attention to whether her students were asking excellent questions.

One could only ask advanced questions once they had studied a topic seriously and then considered it thoroughly afterwards. Only then could one ask a high-level question. The questions in this scroll were beyond her expectations. Not only did they approach problems with a unique perspective, but they also possessed a certain level of spirituality that was hard to describe.

She was deeply impressed that Eliard could ask these kinds of questions.

Eliard blushed. This was the second time the tutor had praised him. Heaven knew these questions weren't his, he had only learned magic for a month, and couldn't understand anything in the scroll.

Eliard didn't explain himself last time, but this time, he feared he would have to because the misunderstanding was getting worse. If it went on any longer he could be in trouble.

He formed his sentences in his head, and said, "Tutor, these... these questions aren't mine."

"Hmm?" Moira's didn't change her tone, she looked up from the scrolls at her handsome young student, "Whose are they, then?"

"A friend of mine. He is seventeen just like me, he tried to enter the academy too, but his magic skills were still too low, so he went back to work on it. I... I was able to pay the tuition because of him. He was a great help."

"Explain everything to me in detail, and don't leave anything out." Moira's interest was piqued.

Eliard was faced with his tutor's piercing blue eyes, eyes that could see through any secret. He didn't dare lie, so he divulged every little detail that had happened since his fateful meeting with Link to Moira, including their recent letters.

Moira listened carefully, sometimes stopping Eliard to ask some questions. She then sighed and said, "So he is now in River Cove, writing a thesis that would prove his understanding of magic?"

"Exactly, Tutor."

"Do you know what his thesis is about?" Moira asked again.

Eliard nodded, "Link discussed some of it with me. He told me he is attempting to explain why a stone would always fall back down to the ground when we throw it up... to be honest, I have been thinking about this problem myself lately, but I have absolutely no idea how to solve it."

As she heard it, Moira was instantly startled. She repeated what Eliard said word by word, "Why would a stone always fall back down to the ground? Why would it fall back down to the ground? What a strange question...no one has ever asked it before, and yet, why indeed?"

She tried to use the knowledge that she had to explain this question, but after a while, she gave it up. Her knowledge was insufficient to explain such a common incident.

After some time, she sighed, "This is a truly rare and excellent question. With just this one question his understanding of magic has already been proven."

She started to find this young man named Link very interesting.

She took the goatskin scroll on the table and said, "These questions are all exceptional, I'm afraid I need some time to think about them. Tomorrow, then. I'll give you the answers tomorrow."

"Thank you Tutor...aren't you angry about what I did?" Eliard cautiously asked.

"Why would I be angry?" Moira smiled, "You're an honest person, I should be proud of that."

Eliard heaved a sigh of relief, but the question of Link's entrance into the academy always hung over his head, so he asked, "Since the question in the thesis has proven my friend's understanding of magic, can he enter the academy now?"

Moira carefully considered the question, "Rules are rules, he would still need to submit a thesis. Let Link finish his, then hand it to me. In due time, I'll discuss it with the dean. I think he'll agree with me."

"Thank you!" Eliard was elated. The tutor was the dean's top student, so her words assured him that Link didn't need to actually solve the problem in his thesis. So long as he produced a coherent paper and submitted it, he would definitely be admitted into the academy.

"You're welcome," Moira smiled. She found the young student Eliard impressive, not just because of his talents in magic, but also because of his integrity.

After some consideration, Moira touched one of the bookshelves behind her and a book flew into her hand. "This friend of yours is quite an impressive young man. I think

he might find this book helpful. You may hand it to him along with your letter. Magic textbooks are extremely valuable, we can't risk any damage or loss, so you will have to run over and pass it to him yourself. He's only allowed to read it for a day, so on the day after, you must return this book to me."

"No problem!" said the overjoyed Eliard.

Chapter 49

A Golden Opportunity!

Half a month following the defeat of the Dark Brotherhood, Link had still been cooped up in the attic of the River Cove Inn.

The interior of the attic was plain and spartan, but Link wouldn't have it any other way. He wouldn't move to another room because there was a tranquility and a quietness in his current space that couldn't be found anywhere else in the inn.

He'd made huge progress in his thesis, but he still couldn't find a definitive way to advance it further. Everything he conceived might've been fascinating, but different lines of thought were all jumbled up together, resulting in an overall haphazard structure.

In other words, each part of Link's thesis did make sense, but it lacked a solid and distinct theme to hold it all together.

By now, the contents of Link's thesis had evolved into something so complex that it became inadequate to encapsulate everything under the Universal Law of Gravitation.

It felt as if he was feeling his way around in the dark; he had no idea whether he was trudging through a thorny bush or walking on a smooth road.

What mysterious knowledge will I uncover when I'm done? Link stared at the symbols that kept popping up in his paper, full of anticipation and excitement.

He wasn't feeling too inspired today, though. He had been wracking his brain for almost half a day and now his concentration was waning. So instead of mulling over it, he put down his quill, leaned back and put his hands behind his head. He rested both legs on the table and with half-closed eyes stared out of the tiny window, drinking in the wonderful view of the Girvent Forest bathed in golden sunlight.

Anxiety and confusion were then cleared away and peace and serenity took over him.

He didn't know how long it had been before he heard the footsteps outside. There

were multiple, one sounded heavy but furtive and deliberately subdued as if it was afraid to disturb Link.

Link immediately recognized the footsteps' owner. He waited until they reached his door, then he pointed the New Moon wand at the wooden door and cast the spell, Magician's Hand.

Click. The door opened, and right outside stood the members of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries.

"Come in," said Link.

Jacker was the first one to walk in. He was carrying a bulging linen sack. The attic room was both small and low-ceilinged, so Jacker had to hunch over to fit into the space. When Gildern and Lucy entered the room, the whole space was so cramped that it felt like it might burst at the seams.

"Mr. Link, you should find a better room to stay in," said Gildern. He didn't understand why such a powerful Magician would choose to stay in such a derelict and draughty attic room. It's not that he didn't have the money, after all.

Link replied with a laugh, "It's good enough for me. I'm used to it. In fact, it's a lot quieter and peaceful here, and I like that."

Then Link turned to Jacker and said, "So, my guess is, you've found the hidden treasures?"

Jacker nodded, then dropped the linen sack onto the floor. From the heavy thud it made, it was clear that this was a hefty sack. He untied the strings, opened the sack, and immediately a golden light shone out of the bag. It was full of gold coins!

"We've discovered all 18 hidden treasures that you described and found 2900 gold coins. Add that to the money we got from selling the loot and the total is 4000 gold coins – much more than we expected. Here are your 2000 gold coins," said Jacker with very low voice, afraid that anyone might overhear.

Heaven knows how anxious they must've felt carrying that huge bulky sack on the street. If anyone knew of the content of the sack, there would've been many bloodbaths over it.

Even so, Link's expressions remained the same, except for a thin smile. "But the deal was to give me 1500 gold coins, why did you bring me an extra 500 gold coins?"

What Jacker admired the most about Link was his stoic nature; it was as if nothing in this world could take him by surprise. Jacker explained, "You are a Magician, but you continued to stay in River Cove, so we guessed it must be because you're trying to enter the East Cove Magic Academy, is that correct?"

Link nodded, he could guess what Jacker's intentions were, but he waited for Jacker to explain it himself.

"We found out that the fees for East Cove Magic Academy are 2000 gold coins. I'm sure you can earn that much money sooner or later, but you'd agree that the earlier you could enter the academy the better it would be. For our current strengths, possessing this much money could be dangerous, and we don't know how to spend this much money anyway. So we thought, why not put the money to good use and give it to you instead?" explained Jacker.

To common folks, the value of gold coins was shockingly immense. If all you wanted was to buy food and drinks and other daily necessities, you could live comfortably on 30 gold coins a year. After giving Link 2000 gold coins, the three would still have 2000 gold coins left to divide among themselves, each of them getting 650 gold coins. That was still an outrageously enormous sum of money.

With this amount of gold coins, they would have more than enough to buy whatever they wanted but could never afford.

For instance, Jacker had now finally bought a full-body set of steel armor. Lucy, on the other hand, had bought a sleek rapier and made it her new regular weapon. She was also wearing new crocodile leather armor. Even Gildern was carrying a brand-new bow and had replaced all his arrows with steel, each one donning an eagle-feather fletching costing him 3 silver coins per arrow. That was a ridiculously expensive price. The three had even bought a small cabin in River Cove town and set it up as their temporary headquarters.

They never would have imagined that they would be able to afford any of these before.

They had fantasized about it, sure. Jacker, for instance, had always dreamt of founding his own mercenary troop. But though their dreams were beautiful, reality had always

hit them in the face with hardships and disappointments. Their biggest constraint had always been, unfortunately, that they were not strong or powerful enough.

Jacker was a Level-3 Warrior and Lucy and Gildern were both at Level-2. For an independent band of mercenaries, that strength level was not too bad, but for a mercenary troop, it was vastly insufficient.

For example, even though they had the money now, they only dared to purchase normal gear and weapons. They would not even think about buying any magic equipment yet for a simple reason—they were afraid that they might get killed before they had a chance to use them. It was very likely that they might get mugged the same night they purchased the gear, then it would've all been in vain.

Jacker's reasoning convinced Link, so he nodded and said, "The extra money will be useful to me. Since you insist, I'll keep it."

The tuition for commoners was 2000 gold coins, but Link was of noble blood, so he should get a discount and pay less than that. Still, learning magic required a lot of money, so he didn't mind having some to spare at all.

Jacker smiled, but Lucy betrayed a sign of resentment in her eyes as she stared at the sack and Gildern had to excuse himself out of the attic. If he had stayed any longer, he might not be able to resist seizing the sack of money and running away with it.

After taking the money, Link suddenly said, "I don't think the news of the Dark Brotherhood's defeat can be concealed for too long. Did you notice anyone spying on you recently?"

Link had originally just thought of them as temporary comrades and planned to sever their ties completely after their mission was over. But now, Link realized how admirable Jacker's character was from his decision today to give him the extra 500 gold coins. Link thought he was an ambitious man and a visionary who was not afraid to take risks.

If such a man was given the opportunity, Link was sure he could soar to great heights!

Even though Link was flung into this strange new world by the God of Light, he never wasted time feeling sorry for himself. Since he's stuck here now, he thought he might as well make the best of it. Link still doubted if he could ever achieve such an incredible mission as saving the world. Whether it was to earn more Omni Points so he could get

stronger and more powerful or to strive towards a better future where he wasn't perpetually hounded by the Dark Army—in the end, it all boiled down to the fact that he must work very hard to try to change the world he now lived in.

Fighting against the Dark Army was not an easy task. If he was to do it alone, failure was almost certain. He would need a helping hand. From what he'd seen, the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries didn't seem like a bad choice and they also seemed worthy of his trust too.

What Link suspected was true—the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries were facing some difficulties recently.

Jacker let out a long sigh and his brows furrowed slightly. "Lately the underworld around Girvent Forest has been in an uproar. We had to be especially discreet when we sold the loot from the Dark Brotherhood," he explained, "Still, these things are impossible to hide, and lately we have encountered many sleuths sniffing around."

Luckily, they were strong and powerful enough that they were not in too much danger. Otherwise, they might already be dead by now.

When all was said and done, their problem still revolved around the fact that they were not powerful enough. After all, they weren't actually responsible for the Dark Brotherhood's defeat, it was just their luck that they had Link on their side.

Jacker believed that they had been able to survive until now largely because those sniffing around hadn't figured out the truth yet.

The moment Jacker told Link of the tight spot they were currently stuck in, Lucy and Gildern both turned grave and sullen. It was obvious that they had all been under a lot of pressure.

Although they now had a lot of money, they had to tread each step much more cautiously than before because they might lose their lives before they got the chance to spend it. Being wealthy was the most desirous thing to them in the past, but now that they had money, they couldn't spend it for fear of being discovered. It was a cruel irony.

Link asked, "Then why don't you take your money and leave this place?"

Jacker laughed bitterly then shook his head. "But we haven't given you your money

yet, so how could we just leave? It wouldn't make any difference anyway. The minute someone finds out about our money, our lives would immediately be in peril."

He didn't know why, but as he was uttering these words he felt a sort of premonition. He felt as if he were at a critical turning point in his life where he could transform from a commoner into a powerful Warrior.

And just as he suspected, the moment he finished his sentence, Link smiled. This time it wasn't the polite smile like before— it was full and sincere. "Very well. As my thanks for what you've done for me today, I will grant you a golden opportunity," Link said.

He now had 39 Omni Points. With these points, he could afford to purchase a secret mythical spell among the Level-3 spells.

It was considered mythical because this spell had an almost god-like power to alter the elements of a Warrior's body. It helped the Warrior to attain Combat Aura no matter who they were or what level they were at.

In its essence, a Warrior's Combat Aura was the precise application of various forces. That made it no different from magic spells.

For a long time, the Warriors' understanding and application of their Combat Aura were minimal, and the Combat Aura that they possessed was also very thin and feeble. Very few Warriors could surpass Level-4, and as for Level-6, 7 or 8, only peerless geniuses who appeared once in a century could achieve such heights.

But about a thousand years ago, there was a Magician named Vance who changed all this. He conducted extensive and detailed research on Warriors' Combat Aura. He was also an obsessive Magician. In order to obtain data and specimens for his research, he had hunted for and assassinated countless Warriors. According to legends, he even managed to capture a genius Level-8 Warrior and then dissected him alive!

After years of exhaustive work, he finally discovered Combat Aura's ultimate secret and pioneered the field of Combat Aura Studies – a branch of studies in secret spells.

The most common way a Warrior's Combat Aura was attained was by natural innate talents but one could also attain it through practice. This practice technique was categorized by the Magicians as another secret spell, but in the world of the Warriors, it was called Battle Art.

After a quick search, Link found this Combat Aura spell among basic secret spells in the spell menu.

Hidden Power

Level-3 Secret Spell

Mana Consumption: 80

Effects: Alters the elemental composition of the spell receiver's body, and greatly enhances the spell receiver's potential. At the same time, it will insert a detailed instruction for the next day's practice into the spell receiver's mind, and through practice, the spell receiver can exponentially advance and increase their power.

(Note: Let this spell be my repentance of the countless murders I committed upon many gifted Warriors.)

Chapter 50

The First Followers

An opportunity?

Jacker's heartbeat quickened. He was wary of the kind of opportunity Link would offer him, but he knew how powerful Link was—a genius Magician who defeated the whole Dark Brotherhood armed with only Level-0 spells. Would someone like that give ordinary opportunities?

Surely not!

He pressed a hand over his thumping heart and waited silently.

Behind him, Lucy and Gildern shared no such emotions. They were both not as excited as Jacker was, but they did sense Jacker's solemnity, so they stayed silent.

By this time, Link had already purchased the spell. He held out the New Moon wand and Mana started to flow into the wand.

For a Level-3 secret spell, the spellcasting process would differ from the usual. When Mana flowed into the wand, it began to arrange into complex configurations and the wand then glowed with a green Runic Aura.

This Runic Aura was a very special magic structure; Link had seen it in a magic book and had read a simple introduction about it. According to the book, Runic Aura was a high-level spell's essential structure. Each aura contained an independent magic structure and when many types of auras combined, a complicated and powerful spell would then form.

The way Link understood it, the spell's structure had a modular design where each aura represented a modular unit. When different modular units combined, an infinite variety of spells arose.

This modular way of thinking would be useful. There's a huge potential for further development, I must carefully research into this, the idea flashed into Link's mind.

The spell, Hidden Power, contained nine Runic Auras, and these auras glowed from the bottom part of the wand to its tip. Each aura shone a ray of green light and then merged at the tip to form a light green orb the size of a fist. Countless tiny runes moved inside the orb like tadpoles swimming in a pond. These runes were too many and too dense to differentiate each one, just looking at them would make someone dizzy.

Illuminated by the green Runic Aura, Link's body seemed to glow in a mysterious light. Because the Mana in his body was also dancing and vibrating, his whole body seemed to suddenly emanate light as well.

Jacker gulped. His eyes were filled with awe and respect. Lucy and Gildern both held their breath.

The first time they met Link, no matter how they looked at him he was just a normal looking young man, but now, this young Magician looked majestically god-like!

Before casting the spell, Link chose words that Jacker would understand to explain what was going on. "Jacker, have you heard of Battle Art before?"

Jacker held his breath suddenly, his heart thumping like beating drums. He softly nodded his head, "Of course, that's how the noble lines pass down from generation to generation!"

On the Firuman continent, Battle Art had always been monopolized by the nobles. It had never been passed down to anyone outside of the noble family or to commoners because the core of Battle Art was only passed down to those related by blood. Any commoners who wanted to acquire Battle Art had just one way, and that was to join the army and then climb up the ranks to become knighted. The knight would then be rewarded with Battle Art from the noble family he served.

But this was a treacherous path because it was almost impossible for a commoner to become a knight. They would have to fight tooth and nail for it, and nine out of ten who tried ended up dying. Even if they did obtain the Battle Art, it would only be the most basic level; the essential parts would be omitted.

But now, it seemed that this Magician, Link, was going to bestow the highly prized Battle Art upon him!

At this point, Jacker felt his blood boiling in his veins. He steadied his own breathing, fearful that if he breathed too hard, he would accidentally blow away the flame of the

green light orb on Link's wand. The tension almost suffocated him.

Behind him, Lucy and Gildern were both stupefied.

Lucy's face was all red, and that pair of almond-shaped eyes sparkled, full of hope. Gildern had completely forgotten the matter of the 2000 gold coins, the only thought that dominated his mind right now was Battle Art.

For every Warrior in the Firuman continent, Battle Art represented power and glory!

With it, one could soar up and cruise through life on the upper crust of society. Without it, one was doomed to struggle in the dirt no matter how hard one worked.

"Jacker, are you ready?" Link asked the large man in front of him.

The strong giant knelt in front of Link and solemnly lowered his head as if he were being knighted. His voice was shaky as he said, "Yes, I'm ready!"

Link pointed the wand in his hand at Jacker, the green aura flowed into Jacker's body, and then the surface of Jacker's body began to glow.

Jacker's body glowed in a yellow hue, like the earth. It was his unique Battle Art that his body generated after receiving Battle Art. This was a testament to Link's Hidden Power spell's unique capacity—to develop a person's potential, improve their body constitution, and let them absorb energy from their surroundings much better.

Under this spell, Jacker's Battle Art intensified rapidly.

But there was more.

Jacker could sense that there was information in his head that wasn't there before. He closed his eyes to concentrate on it and was shocked to discover that it was the practice method to develop his Battle Art. The information was very clear, with key details; this was the most valuable knowledge for a Warrior.

As he opened his eyes, Jacker pressed a hand on his heart, and swore, "Master Link, I, Jacker, son of Bodin, by the name of the God of Light, swear, that with your agreement, from this day onwards, I will forever be loyal to you, forever follow your every footstep, you shall have my strength whenever you need it!"

Yes, Battle Art, he had obtained the thing he had so desired for all his life. Moreover, he received the complete Battle Art without any omissions. His brain contained all the detailed methods, all he needed to do was practice it daily and his Battle Art would continue to advance on and on.

With Battle Art, those Legendary realms would no longer be a mere fantasy for him. One day, he would possess unrivaled strength, and become a Warrior above all the others!

Then, Jacker began to reminisce about his past.

He was born in a rural little mountain village, and his father was a blacksmith. They were both headstrong, so they butted heads a lot. One day, when he was still young, they had a heated argument and Jacker ran away from home afterwards. He had planned to wander and achieve some success before going back. All these years, although he had been very hardworking, he felt that his successes were still too small, so even though he missed his father and sister very much, he was too ashamed to go home.

But everything was about to change now!

He heaved a long sigh. Jacker felt markedly content. His heart was filled with respect and gratitude towards the young Magician in front of him. His kindness had touched Jacker's heart. He was prepared to give his life to serve Link.

Link was taken aback by Jacker's reaction, his only intention was to gain a comrade. He never thought of gaining a follower sworn to him under the name of the God of Light. What Jacker did was no different from selling his life to Link.

Yet all Link did was cast one spell. The effort to him was minuscule, on Earth there would be no such easy deed. But then, when he thought about it, Link suddenly realized that this world is a strange world—it had its own separate set of rules. He understood that Battle Art was very important to a Warrior, so he had no need to struggle or oppose it. He decided that when in Rome, he should just do as the Romans did.

Thus, he nodded his head and said, "I give you permission to be my follower. But I don't like to be interrupted, you can go your own way, and whenever I need you, I'll find you."

"Yes, my Lord." Jacker immediately changed the way he addressed Link. He looked behind and made eye contact with Lucy and Gildern.

The three mercenaries had fought alongside each other for a long time, so they understood each other well. Lucy and Gildern had initially noticed the strange expression in Jacker's eyes, and now Jacker was reminding them again. The two weren't stupid, they knew that the opportunity was rare, so, without hesitation, they stepped up and knelt on the ground.

"My Lord, please accept me as your follower!" said Lucy, though her tone was tainted with uncertainty. She had not known Link for long, so she still had some reservations.

"My Lord, allow me to bask in your glory!" said Gildern. For someone who always spoke sarcastically, it turned out that he knew how to flatter people when he wanted to after all.

Chapter 51

My Brother! (1)

Link's current Maximum Mana limit was 99.1 points. When a Magician's Mana was full, his body would glow with an aura and his eyes would look bright. These were simply the effects of magic. But right now, Link's Mana was down to 9 points, and so the magic aura around his body dimmed drastically, and his eyes were now noticeably dulled.

When the three mercenaries first met Link, this unremarkable looking appearance was exactly what they saw.

Link considered Lucy and Gildern's vow of loyalty towards him and decided to accept them. The three members were all equally important to the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries and Lucy and Gildern both showed promising talents and had proven themselves to be reliable comrades in battles. So Link nodded in agreement.

"I will grant you Battle Art too, but not right now because I've depleted all my Mana. By the way, I must remind you that Battle Art is only an instruction of the proper practice method. If you want to develop your Combat Aura, you'll still need to work hard."

Hidden Power was only a Level-3 spell after all, and it was only the basic version purchased with Omni Points. In other words, this was only an average-level Battle Art, so the resulting Combat Aura wouldn't be too spectacular either. Link calculated that if the mercenaries practiced hard enough, at 35 years old they would be able to reach Level-5 but from then on it would get harder and harder to advance further. Lucy and Gildern would probably peak at Level-6, while Jacker might reach a little bit higher, but still, no higher than Level-7.

But that was only temporary, of course. If the three turned out to be very useful to him, Link might consider giving them a higher-level Battle Art in the future.

"Understood!" The three mercenaries all nodded. They never shirked from discipline and hard work. What they dreaded were useless and wasted efforts where they pushed through and gave it their all and but still remained at the same level.

The mercenaries noticed how bone-weary Link looked, so they excused themselves, said their farewells and left the attic. Once they reached the inn's hall, Jacker exclaimed, "Now I can feel that my dreams are within my grasp!"

Lucy was still shaken by what happened in the attic. "These days, I feel as if I'm in a dream. Jacker, should we give Lord Link all the money that we have left? I heard learning magic uses up a lot of gold coins. Once the tuition is all paid, he might not have much left to use," she murmured.

They still had 1500 gold coins left, and this was a sum too big to ever spend for them. In the end, all they could do was hide it somewhere safe and leave it there.

"Lucy's right. Jacker, what do you say?" Gildern said.

Gildern felt no more resentment towards Link. With Battle Art, he now dared to hope for a brighter future. Money was nothing at all compared to how invaluable Battle Art was to Warriors, and yet Link had granted them such a precious thing so graciously. If he still begrudged Link because of money, then he was nothing more than a self-serving ridiculous little mouse.

Jacker had no objections, of course. He had devoted his life to Link. Now that everyone in the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had become Link's followers, he knew that whatever benefited Link would benefit them too. The more powerful Link got, the more promising their future would be as well.

And so, he would do anything in his power to support Link's progress.

"Not only should we give the remaining money to him, we must also strive to strengthen ourselves as fast as we can, and earn as much money as we can to support Lord Link's studies!" Jacker said.

Lucy and Gildern were both smart enough to understand the wisdom of Jacker's words. They both nodded in agreement.

Jacker added in a low, serious voice, "One more thing, we must lay low for the time being. Let's not make any commotion lest anyone takes notice of us, at least until this storm settles down. Right now, the best thing we can do is to go back and focus on practicing. I will share the instructions I received from my Battle Art with both of you, so you can practice them too."

They were sailing close to the wind lately, with many people from the underworld trying to sniff them out. Even today, they had to be especially careful when coming to the River Cove inn, anxious that Link's life might be endangered. In these circumstances, the wisest thing to do was to learn from the tortoise and hide in their shells for a while.

Once the three came to an agreement, they decided to go back to their makeshift headquarter to get the money. But just as they were making their way out of the inn, they noticed a carriage right in front of the entrance.

It was a handsome carriage, with a sky-blue top and silver-gilt edges. The horses were all majestic, long-legged pedigrees that looked stronger than the horses of some knights they encountered in the North. Even the coachman was wearing a luxurious livery. One look and it was clear that the carriage belonged to someone of high personage.

"Who's that coming into the inn? Must be some hotshot." The inn hall was now filled with droning sibilant voices discussing the identity of the approaching visitor.

"Shhh! Didn't you see that crest on the carriage? It's from the East Cove Magic Academy!" someone in the hall said in a low voice.

"Is that a Magician, then?" the other replied.

As they overheard these conversations, the three hurried to the side to give way. Ever since meeting with Link, they now had a newfound respect for all Magicians. To them, real Magicians were almost as powerful as gods, existing in a completely different plane of reality from those drifting Magicians they'd previously met. Link hadn't been able to enter the academy yet, but his power was already at a fearsome level. They couldn't begin to imagine how much more powerful a Magician from the East Cove Magic Academy would be.

I wonder how powerful this Magician is, the three simultaneously speculated.

When the carriage finally came to a full stop, the door opened. Then, a young man garbed in a sky-blue Magician's robe climbed out of the carriage. Gildern drew a sharp breath the moment he saw him.

"By the God of Light, how could a man be so much more handsome than I am?" Gildern had always thought of himself as a good-looking man and he had won over many

women with his looks. But looking at the Magician in front of him, he felt ashamed of his looks for the first time in his life.

Just look at him—that tailor-made Magician's robe, that white jade-like wand in his hand, his tall and well-built body, that dreamy face with its striking features, and that magnificent aura his whole body was basked in—it was as if the Sun God had been dropped from the heavens! Gildern thought in astonishment.

To possess such arresting looks, while also being a true Magician from the academy—he must have been a favorite of the God of Light!

The moment this Magician appeared, he became a distinct focal point of everyone's attention in the room. Everyone around was dwarfed by his presence, even Jacker's almost seven-foot frame with his muscular build now paled in comparison to this glorious creature.

What a lucky bastard! Gildern had felt the magnetic attraction too and couldn't help but envy that Magician.

Lucy was the only one who was unimpressed. She just scowled and cursed, "So what, he's still just a pansy!"

When she was younger, she had been duped by a handsome man. Not only did that bastard cheat on her, what was truly unforgivable was the fact that he had also stolen all of her money! From that moment on, she had been especially suspicious of all good-looking men. She now thought that ordinary-looking men like Link were a much better lot, and definitely much more reliable and trustworthy.

Jacker was the calmest of all. He crooked his eyebrows slightly and wondered aloud, "Why do I have a feeling that this Magician from the East Cove Magic Academy is still not as powerful as Lord Link?"

He was a Level-3 Warrior who now possessed Battle Art. He was much more perceptive now, and when he looked at the Magician in front of him, he sensed how weak the Magician was. Jacker could probably defeat him with just one punch.

"Who knows? Maybe he's just a pretty boy who's good for nothing," said Lucy with a grimace.

By this time, the young Magician had walked into the inn under everyone's

mesmerized stare. The three mercenaries then looked away and walked out of the inn and went on their way.

The Magician was none other than Eliard. He was here to visit Link, and not only did he bring the answers to Link's questions, he also brought with him the magic textbook from Moira and some money as well.

He knew that Link wouldn't have much money left after he lent him 1300 gold coins. He still had no way of returning all the money, but now that he was a student in the academy, he realized that in the world of Magicians, 1300 gold coins really was not much at all.

As Moira's favorite student, he utilized his talents to write some Level-0 magic scrolls, created some basic potions, and earned 15 gold coins. He believed Link wouldn't have much money, so he brought 10 gold coins in the hopes that it might alleviate Link's current situation.

When he found the innkeeper, Eliard asked him, "Hey, Matt, which room is my friend Mr. Link staying in?"

Chapter 52

My Brother! (2)

Matt the innkeeper remembered Eliard, and Link left an even deeper impression on him. When he saw Eliard, he shrugged and said, "Room? He's not in a room. After you left, Mr. Link has always stayed in the attic."

What? The Attic!

Eliard's heart pounded violently. He forced himself not to show any expression and continued asking, "Why is he staying in the attic?"

"No money, why else?" Matt said matter-of-factly, "Before, he even ate coarse wheat bread every day. Two loaves a day, one for lunch, and one for dinner. Recently it seems he's earning some money, but not much, I'd say. He's mostly cooped up in the attic. If you want to see him, he's right upstairs."

When he heard that, Eliard's heart started pounding again. He knew that after Link gave him the 1300 gold coins, he probably didn't have much left. But he never would have thought that it would get Link into such a dire situation.

But why didn't he mention it in the letters? In the letters, he went on about the beauty of Girvent Forest, about his questions of spells and magic theory, and yet, not a word about his living condition was mentioned.

Why did he have to do that? Eliard could not come up with any answers. He thanked Matt, and under the gazes of the crowd in the inn hall, he climbed the stairs up to the attic.

On his way, he heard the discussions in the hall.

"But that's a real Magician! Is he really here to meet Link?"

"Does that mean Link really is a Magician?"

"That's impossible! He wears tattered rags, eats and stays in a place even I wouldn't

be willing to, how could someone like that be a Magician?"

These voices had proven the innkeeper's words. Eliard felt even more distressed now. His eyes started to sting until it became quite unbearable. He thought it must have been the dust in the inn getting into his eyes.

He leaned on the wooden rail and kept climbing up. Once he'd reached the third floor, he turned at the corner and reached the inn's attic.

The attic was dark and dingy, the stairs were covered with a thick carpet of dust, and the door to the attic room was low and narrow. As he stood at the door, he was stifled by how cramped this space was.

He had been staying in the spacious and high-ceilinged Magic Tower so long, that when he was back in a commoners' dwelling like this, he felt alien and uncomfortable.

Eliard rapped softly on the door. He tried his best to calm down his nerves and keep his composure.

"Come in, it's not locked." The voice was familiar. It was as calm and gentle as before, like a peaceful pond under the starry night.

Eliard pushed the door open and entered the room, and then was faced with a view of Link's back bathed in sunlight.

The golden sunlight shone in through the small window in the attic, like a golden column in a dark stuffy room. The light column nicely lit up his frail and thin body.

This gaunt figure was sitting on a lame chair, his hand was holding a goose feather quill, and he was earnestly writing on an old mottled table. In the corner of the table, there were a few magic textbooks and a stack of goatskin scrolls.

Eliard turned to his right and saw a rough mattress on the floor. In the corner of the room, there was a big spider web with a fat spider casually hanging in the middle of it. In another corner, there was a large hole in the wall stuffed with a rag. That didn't seem to do much because currents of cold draught still blew into the attic.

Decrepit and in disrepair, the room was like a typical dwelling of a poor peasant. Eliard had been a wandering orphan in the past, so he knew this life well. But he never thought that Link, a nobleman's son, would also be suffering this fate too.

But precisely because Eliard had experienced it all before, he sympathized with what Link was going through more acutely!

Anguish, shame, and gratitude—a flurry of emotions swirled in Eliard's mind, they sent a hot flash to his eyes, and he began to tear up. But before the tears fell, he hastily lifted his chin up and forced the tears back.

When he was eight-years-old, he was bullied by a few children in the streets. He cried and cried, but as he was an orphan, no one came to consoled him, they only came to mock and ridicule. He swore from then on that he would never shed a single tear ever again.

But at this moment, there was no holding back the tears.

Link was a nobleman, he had 1300 gold coins with him, he could've comfortably settled down in the River Cove Inn. But because he wanted to help Eliard, he sacrificed his own comfort and had to live poorly. How could Eliard be unmoved by that?

What's even more agonizing was the fact that Link never said a word about it. He had been comfortably settling into the Magic Tower studying magic, but at the same time, Link had never mentioned a word about his difficult life. Instead, he'd always been consoling Eliard, reminding him to concentrate on his studies and not be distracted. Eliard did not even suspect anything like this was happening to Link.

"Link?" Eliard tentatively called out, while strenuously calming himself down.

That frail body was stunned, the quill in his hand stopped moving, and then he turned his body around. "Eliard, what are you doing here?" Link said, startled.

He'd gotten thinner, much thinner than a month ago. His eyes seemed bigger now, and they looked dull and lifeless. His body was wearing that rough linen robe which seemed too big as it hung on his bony figure.

Eliard's heart wrenched at the sight. He was at his limit, his eyes were red now and a teardrop fell as he said, "Why didn't you say anything?"

Link was considerably shocked when he saw Eliard's expression. He wondered how this kid could be so sensitive. He was almost an adult, how could he cry for such a tiny matter?

But he thought of what he knew from the game and realized that this was indeed Eliard's nature.

In the game, there were three occasions when Eliard cried, once was for his wife who was murdered by a demon, once was for a comrade fallen in battle, and once when he witnessed countless refugees from the North.

This half-man, half-boy was just that sensitive.

Link thought about it, and guessed why Eliard would be upset, and laughed and said, "You're blaming me for leaving out this small detail?"

Eliard nodded. His life in the academy had been comfortable, in fact, if he worked hard for a little bit, he could even earn some gold coins. This month, he didn't spend much time writing magic scrolls, and yet he still earned 15 gold coins. Some students who were more industrious could even earn more than 50 gold coins in a month!

If only Link had told him, he wouldn't need to live in such poor conditions.

Link laughed and shook his head, "My friend, my life hasn't been as bad as it seems. You see, if you look out from this window, that's the beautiful Girvent Forest. And listen, can't you hear how quiet and peaceful this room is? And think about it, I've got no money, and my clothes are old and plain, so no one bats an eye on me, no one distracts me or disturbs me, so I can fully concentrate on working on my thesis and magic spells. Don't you see how lucky I am?"

When he put it that way, Eliard was swayed. But he couldn't help feeling that there was something wrong. "But..."

"No buts! You know all I care about is magic. Apart from magic, nothing else matters to me." Link was all smiles and he shone as bright as the sun, chasing away the gloom and doom in Eliard's heart.

Alright, since he put it that way. Eliard felt better, but what he saw today had been etched deeply into his heart and he would never forget it.

He knew that in this world there was only one person who would sacrifice his honor and dignity, who was willing to be ridiculed, who was willing to live like a beggar, just to help him.

In his heart, such a man was nothing less than a brother. If need be, Eliard would be willing to sacrifice everything for this brother.

"Are you free now? Let's get a drink in the hall, how about that?" Eliard wiped his tears and tucked his emotions away.

"Sure, no problem, just give me a minute while I tidy up my scrolls," Link said with a laugh.

Once everything had been neatly tucked away, the two went downstairs to the hall.

"Matt, the best dish you have, and the best ale," Eliard shouted his orders.

"No problem," said Matt with a smile.

Once the food and drinks arrived, the two chatted away as they ate.

They talked about Link's thesis' development and some magic theory problems. Eliard told Link all about what he'd seen and what he'd learned in the academy, as well as some circulating gossip he heard.

Each of them was so engaged in the conversation that, without knowing it, more than ten cups of ale had been downed. Eliard couldn't handle a lot of alcohol, so his words started to slur and he began speaking nonsense. Link's ability to hold his drink wasn't too bad, so he managed to stay ostensibly sober.

As he was drunk, Eliard started to act strangely—he would cry and then laugh. Link didn't know how to handle this, so he asked the inn servant to take Eliard to a room so he could rest.

"No, stop it! Go away, I want to sleep in the attic!" Eliard kept insisting.

Link had no choice but to relent, so in the end, another mattress was added to the attic and after a while, Eliard finally fell asleep on it. Link was sweating from the effort to subdue Eliard, and before long the slight alcoholic effects he had were gone.

He went outside the inn and spoke to Eliard's coachman from the Magic Academy. The coachman said they had planned to spend the night in town and would head back to the academy tomorrow. Link was relieved by this and headed back to the attic.

There were scrolls and a textbook that Eliard had brought with him in the attic room, he glanced through all of them, and he was immediately captivated by the textbook. It was a high-level magic textbook—just what he needed!

This magic textbook was called Progress in Magic Spells, it contained the introduction to Level-1 spells and the structure of the spells. It also had a rough summary of the progressions of high-level spells. Link flipped through the pages and discovered that inside there were also detailed descriptions of Runic Aura structures!

"What a great book!" Link was immediately engrossed in the book. He read and read, completely unaware of the flow of time.

He didn't know how much time has passed when behind him a voice called out, "What time is it?"

Eliard had woken up.

Link was startled by the voice, he fumbled for his pocket watch and said, "It's seven in the evening."

Link realized now that he was quite hungry.

"I'll go get us something to eat." Eliard was hungry too, so he left the attic, then five minutes later he returned with a huge tray of cheese.

The two began to eat. While eating, Link continued to read the magic textbook. He very carefully flipped through each page and took great care not to let any dust or dirt land on the pages. Eliard, on the other hand, casually flipped through Link's thesis.

Eliard was completely enthralled by Link's thesis. The silence between them was only interrupted by Eliard's occasional murmurs like, "This is astounding! Oh, I've never seen these kinds of deductions before!"

Eliard was completely spellbound by Link's paper.

Chapter 53

My Brother! (3)

The candle burned brightly all through the night in the attic of the River Cove Inn. The two young Magicians inside were both hard at work.

One was engrossed in studying the magic textbook, the other was immersed in the former's thesis. Time flew by and none of them noticed that it was already midnight.

Link felt tired, so he put down the textbook and prepared to go to sleep. His body was quite frail, so he had to be cautious and mindful of his health. Even though he would often be so immersed in a task that he would forget the time, the moment he remembered, he would always ensure that he got enough rest.

While settling down under his blanket, he noticed Eliard was still poring over his thesis. "Hey, Eliard, it's late. Why don't you get some rest?" he said.

"Just a minute, there's something I'm trying to understand here," Eliard said as he quickly jotted down notes with a goose feather quill. He was keenly trying to work out a point about Mana transformation in Link's thesis.

He might not know much about the application or usage of this theory, but he couldn't help but be fascinated by it. As a Magician, he could easily perceive a sense of elegance in this simple Mana formula, even though he was just an apprentice. Just as a lecherous man would be captivated when he saw a beautiful woman—he was, similarly, completely sucked in.

Link saw how focused Eliard was—he knew that there was no way he could convince him to rest, so he said nothing more and went to sleep himself.

And so the night passed silently.

At three in the morning the following day, Link woke up automatically like clockwork. His concentration was now razor-sharp, and he sensed there were some quiet movements in the room. As he opened his eyes, he saw Eliard still sitting at the table exactly as he was before Link went to sleep. His eyes were as red as a rabbit's, but he

didn't seem to be the least bit sleepy.

So he's just as obsessive as I am. It was no coincidence that in the game Eliard managed to become a Legendary Pinnacle Magician.

Link was careful not to disturb him as he sat up and cast the Illumination spell. He then began to read the textbook that Eliard had brought with him.

The magic textbook was a property of the East Cove Magic Academy, so he would have to return it soon. He read through the entire book once, just to memorize its contents. Then he would slowly make sense of what he memorized later.

He had an extraordinary memory, plus he had just woken up so his concentration right now was working at its full capacity. He only had to read through the textbook once and he would remember everything, including the graphs and illustrations. He read it a second time to go over some details he might have missed, then once more to strengthen his memory. Now he was at his fourth reading, and he could remember clearly each and every detail in this Level-1 magic textbook titled Progress in Magic Spells. A quick search through his memory and he would recall every detail from the book as vividly as if he were watching a slide film.

It sure is nice to have an incredible brain, thought Link proudly. He was grateful for the exceptional memory he now possessed.

By this time, it was getting light outside. Link checked on Eliard again and saw that he was still as immersed in the thesis as ever. He noticed Eliard's face was getting pale, and thought that if he continued this way, his body would soon collapse.

So Link walked up to him and forcibly pulled away his thesis. "Hey, you really need to get some rest."

"Wait, let me read it just a little longer," pleaded Eliard. He was staring wide-eyed at the goatskin paper in Link's hand. He looked as if he was going to grab it but was hesitant to do so.

"It's not even finished yet, so what's the rush?" Link was taken aback by how fascinated Eliard was. He thought what he'd written was still too disorganized, with no clear line of thought. He thought it was nowhere near presentable and nowhere near finished. Why exactly was Eliard so interested in it?

"What? It's not even finished yet?" Eliard looked discouraged.

He had read through it for the whole night, but in the end only managed to finish reading three pages. Of what he'd read, he only understood half of it at most, but Link had, in fact, written about fifteen or sixteen pages in total. Last night, he glanced through the last few pages but realized he couldn't make head nor tail of its contents.

But even so, he was certain that this thesis contained novel and revolutionary ideas!

"Link, I think if you could just reorganize some points in the thesis, then think up a suitable title, I'm sure it could get approved by the academy... or rather, what if I copy down parts of your thesis and bring it back to the academy, so my tutor could have a look?" said Eliard. It was a spur-of-the-moment idea that he just came up with.

He believed that even if the thesis couldn't get Link admitted into the academy, it would definitely improve his tutor's opinion of Link even further. She might even lend Link more textbooks too.

Eliard would do anything he could to help Link, without any hesitation.

It's too bad Link's innate magic talent wasn't sufficient, otherwise, he would've been accepted by the academy a long time ago.

Eliard sighed. He noticed that Link's current magic aura was as dim as before. It was obvious that Link had only been consoling himself when he told Eliard previously that his magic aura was so dim because he was hurt.

Link didn't know what went through Eliard's mind at that moment. He considered Eliard's idea then nodded and said, "Fine. You haven't had rest yet, so you'd better have some sleep after breakfast. I'll organize the parts of my thesis that I've already written, and you can take it back with you."

He had only just roughly read through the book Progress in Magic Spells, but he'd lapped up all the knowledge he could glean. He was like a wanderer in a desert who would drink up all the water of the first pool he'd finally stumbled upon.

If Link could feel this way with a book, he was sure that when he finally became a student of the East Cove Magic Academy, it would feel as if he was a beggar that had walked into Aladdin's cave of hidden treasures!

These thoughts made Link's desire to enter the academy deepen.

Eliard, on the other hand, was indeed very tired. He went to bed after having his breakfast and Link began to clean up his thesis.

Even though he still had a long way before the completion of his paper, Link noticed that a clear outline began to emerge. As the author, he was very familiar with the contents, so in no time at all, he managed to organize it all into distinct parts.

Of the many parts it was divided into, the very first was devoted to the formulas of Newton's Universal Law of Gravitation.

It was true that Link had finally managed to churn out the formulas of the Universal Law of Gravitation, but this was just a superficial conclusion to tie up the many complex ideas in his thesis together. There were still premises that were not yet proven. In short, the current thesis did not represent the true depth of Link's analysis.

This part contained the most compelling arguments, so I'll let Eliard take it with him. The rest is still too ambiguous, I'd better work on it more before showing it.

Link made a final decision to let Eliard take the part of his thesis where he derived the formulas of Universal Law of Gravitation. As for the parts where he dug deeper and made more complicated conjectures, he felt they were still too unrefined and was reluctant to show them to anyone.

After deciding which parts he would include, Link copied the revised version down on new goatskin papers. Then, as Eliard was still sleeping, he took out the scrolls on which Eliard's tutor had written her answers to Link's questions and started to read them.

The moment he read the explanation for the first question, Link had to admit that Eliard's tutor was indeed a gifted Magician with a deep knowledge of magic.

Her explanations possess such clarity and conviction. This tutor Moira sure is impressive. Why haven't I heard of this name before from the game? Link wondered. The questions he gave to Eliard were all complicated, but Moira could give him answers that not only cleared all of Link's confusions, but also inspired him with new ideas to advance his thesis.

He searched carefully through his memory but still couldn't find any character named

Moira in the game. There was no trace of her even during the infamous accident in the East Cove Magic Academy.

But it's a strange thing that such a knowledgeable Level-5 Magician with her own Mage Tower didn't leave any trace of herself in history.

But it wasn't important, anyway. Link couldn't think of any reason for Moira's invisibility in the game's history, but he decided to leave the matter aside and continued to read the answers on the scroll. His reading speed was fast, so in a short time, he had completed reading all six answers. Just as he was putting the scrolls away, he discovered some messages left by Moira in a neat handwriting.

"I'm glad my student has such an exceptional friend such as you. Your understanding of magic is deep, and your approaches are unique. If there are any questions at all that you have regarding magic or spells, write directly to me, and I will do my best in giving you the answers and explanations. – Moira Droskyn."

These words proved that Link had now received Moira's recognition.

He pondered for a while and realized that he did have some questions. Since Moira insisted she was happy to help, why not write her some questions now?

Link lifted the quill pen and wrote down some new questions. Eliard would be going back to the academy today, so he would just give the letter to him so he could give it to Moira.

At midday, Eliard woke up. Before he departed, he was about to leave 10 gold coins for Link, but Link interjected cordially. "Don't worry, my friend. My father had finally answered my letters and sent me some money too."

"Oh, that's good to hear!" said Eliard, visibly relieved. He knew that Link's father was a nobleman, so it wasn't strange to him that he would send Link some money.

"Well, goodbye, Link," said Eliard.

"Farewell, and safe journey."

And so Eliard took the revised thesis from Link, Moira's textbook, and Link's letter with him. He climbed back into the carriage and made his journey back to the East Cove Magic Academy.

When the carriage was out of his view, Link turned back into the inn. By this time, the way people in the inn hall looked at him changed drastically. They now treated him with more respect and reverence.

Link found it amusing. This was just typical of the common folks—they would be drinking in the hall all day shooting the breeze. Then when a bright star appeared in the sky, they would all point at it and exclaim in awe. But moments later they would go back to their gossips and rumors, wasting their lives away. Getting respect from these people did not make Link feel flattered or honored at all.

He walked up to the counter and told Matt the innkeeper, "Send my dinner and tomorrow's breakfast to my room please, thank you."

Matt's face bloomed as bright as a chrysanthemum flower. "No problem."

Link climbed up the stairs to the attic and then went back to reading.

I know many Level-1 spells. If I could improve a few, then create a few Supreme Magical Skills, my power would increase exponentially. But which spell should I start with?

He considered it for a while and decided to improve the spell Vector Throw. The Mana consumption of this spell was low, its adaptability was boundless, and even if the opponent was armed with anti-magic gear, this spell would still cause considerable damage and pain.

Just as Link was settling into deep concentration, engrossed in the task of modifying the spell, something sinister was unfolding in the underworld of Girvent Forest.

In the Cove of Echoes.

Two black shadows were standing amid the ruins of the cove.

"Did you find the runes?" asked the black shadow who was clad in a loose cloak, with a wand in his hand. Had Viktor still been alive, he would've recognized the cloaked figure as the mysterious Magician who had given him the Occultic Runes.

"No. I couldn't find it anywhere in the cove. But I've found these," said the other black shadow who was clad in a greyish brown leather armor, his face covered by a hood. He had just come out of the cave and was holding a piece of burnt reddish rotten flesh

and fragments of leather armor.

The black-robed Magician was alarmed. "There's a trace of magic spells. I've seen this leather armor before... it's Viktor's. He must've been transformed by occult magic, and yet he was killed. Who would have such power? Could it be a Magician from the East Cove Academy?"

"No, Viktor was a cautious man. He wouldn't provoke the ire of the Magicians. I've heard rumors that it was a group of mercenaries who did this."

"Mercenaries?" The black shadow went silent briefly, then reopened his mouth and said, "Find these people, the runes must be found no matter what it takes! Here is your reward."

"Understood." The black shadow took the pouch from the black-robed Magician. He opened it, saw its contents and smiled. Then, his body blurred, became translucent and blended completely into the surroundings of the cove.

Soft rustling footsteps echoed around the cove. It was the sound of this black shadow leaving, masked from his surrounding by a spell that granted him invisibility.

Chapter 54

Link's Whistle

It was a beautiful day.

The sky was bright and blue like pure tourmaline. The golden sunlight was filtered through the leafy canopy, sketching a painting of mottled light and shadows on the ground.

Green-feathered birds sang praises to mother nature, squirrels scurried from tree to tree, storing as much food as they could before winter came.

In River Cove town, not far from the small headquarters of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries, there was a clearing in the middle of the forest.

This clearing was about 100 feet wide. It was thoroughly cleared by the mercenaries, its ground was leveled and then covered with fine sand. It was installed with training wood dummies and arrow targets, and there was also a resting hut. In the area surrounding the clearing, thorny shrubs were planted and many anti-trespassing devices were set up. If any strangers were to break in, the devices would make loud noises.

Ever since Link used the Hidden Power spell on Jacker, Jacker had been training his combat skills in this clearing area. His body was originally very strong, but now that he received Battle Art, his strength kept accumulating and rapidly progressing. After only a few days, he had progressed to Level-3, and there were signs that he might even break through to Level-4.

Lucy and Gildern looked on, immensely envious of Jacker's progress. They could only hope that Link's Mana recovered quickly so he would use this enigmatic spell on them too.

Link had been resting for five days, he should have replenished all his Mana by now.

These few days, Link's life had been very convenient. Because he didn't like to be disturbed, he stayed in the attic room of the inn. But Lucy went there to clean his room

until it was spotless. The spider webs were removed, his shabby mattress was changed to a nice little bed, his blanket and bed cover were all changed, now crisp with the scent of sunshine and clean linen, and his dirty laundry was all cleaned.

Even Link had to admit, having someone take care of his daily chores this way wasn't bad at all.

Today, he was stuck writing his thesis, but his new spell experiment was successful. The weather was good anyway, so he went to the clearing to rest a little. He would also use this opportunity to cast Hidden Power on Lucy.

When Link arrived at the clearing, Gildern was practicing with his bow and Jacker was practicing his shield attack on a heavy sandbag—there was no sign of Lucy anywhere.

"Where's Lucy?" Link asked. The mercenaries had agreed earlier among themselves that Lucy would be the second one to receive Hidden Power.

As they saw him, Jacker and Gildern immediately stopped practicing. Jacker grabbed a rag and wiped the sweat off his face, and said, "Lucy went to the market to hire some people, she'll be back in an hour or so."

"Oh, fine. I'm not in a hurry anyway," Link nodded then said to Jacker, "Come on, before she comes back, come and try out a new spell I've just developed."

"No problem." Jacker took his big iron shield and covered the front of his body. He got into a defensive stance and then activated his earth element Combat Aura.

Immediately, his body and the shield were shrouded in a solid layer of yellow gemstone-like light—this was the light of his Combat Aura. Compared to the Jacker that Link first met, the light was brighter and more concentrated now; it could even rival that of a Level-4 Warrior.

"Great progress," Link applauded, "But my spell's pretty powerful, so be careful."

Jacker knew the power of Link's spells very well, so he didn't take the warning lightly. Jacker focused his concentration.

When he saw that Jacker was prepared, Link began to cast the spell. He didn't want to catch Jacker off guard so he did it slower.

Mana slowly flowed into the New Moon wand. A continuous flow of runic shadows flowed out from the tip then combined to form Runic Aura.

Link was inspired by this Hidden Power's Runic Aura, which was an essential component in high-level spells. So, he adapted the modular structure of the spell to develop his own new spell.

There were three Runic Auras: transparent water aura, fiery red aura, and pure white aura. Each one of these Runic Auras contained massive quantities of magic runes, and all of them created a truly magical sight.

When the Runic Aura was forming, Link used his left hand to take something from a pouch that was hanging on his waist. He took a powdery substance out of the pouch – they were iron filings.

He opened his palm and the iron filings flowed towards the tip of the wand which then glowed brilliantly in a white aura. This was the color of the metal element aura. Except in places like mineral caves, naturally occurring metal was scarce. By bringing his own supply of metal elements in the form of iron filings, Link was able to increase his spellcasting speed remarkably. However, Iron filings were rare and expensive in this world—he couldn't even find them at the blacksmith's. So in the end, he got them from a sawmill where they were carved out by a hydraulic saw. Twenty pounds of iron filings had cost him 20 gold coins.

From the same spot at the tip of the wand where the metal element flowed into, a stream of red flame accumulated and these two elements rapidly combined with each other. The metal element formed the shell and the fire element formed the core, combining to make a fist-sized silvery iron ball.

Instantly, after the iron ball was formed, the third rune circling at the tip of the wand began to work. A streak of brilliant light shot towards the silvery iron ball and it began to rotate rapidly.

Not only did it start to rotate, it was also changing shapes. It started to transform into a pointy shape and the light orb's rotation also became the axis of the rotation of the spike.

The spike's rotation speed was very quick, so much so that a tornado began to form around it and the air made a high-pitched hissing sound.

Seeing this, Jacker inadvertently gulped. Because Link cast the spell slowly, he saw the whole process of the spell materializing, and it looked absolutely terrifying.

"Get ready, I'm releasing it!" Link warned.

Jacker nodded, then held on to his iron shield tightly. His whole body was hidden behind the shield's cover.

And then, Link released the ball of magic.

Instantly, this flaming hot metal spike that contained condensed fire elements shot through the air as fast as lightning; it traveled almost 100 feet, hitting the middle of Jacker's shield.

Clang! There was a deep and resonant chime, and on Jacker's shield, the yellow tinge of his Combat Aura scattered in all directions like firecrackers.

Jacker was hit by an enormous force—although he was still standing, he was pushed three feet backwards. His feet had carved the sand into two channels.

He felt his arm go numb and there were a few seconds where he simply couldn't find the energy to fight against this force. He checked his shield and discovered a fist-sized dent about an inch deep on his thick shield.

Jacker stood motionless as he witnessed such awesome power. He knew Link also had spells for fireballs that looked like glass orbs, and if Link had decided to use that on him now, Jacker could be finished off swiftly and sent to the kingdom of gods with just one move.

"My Lord, what kind of spell was that?" Gildern asked, horrified.

They had been trying to learn and understand magic with Link recently, and they now had a rough idea of what spells were and what they involved. Still, this new move was an enigma to them. If it was a fireball, then its power was just too terrifying, and if it were a metal ball, then its speed and charging power were also too powerful. What's scarier was the fact that the four rays of metal that scattered after impact were powerful as well. If they had been in a crowd, the scattered shards would've caused unimaginable damage.

Link put his wand away, then gave a rough explanation, "I used some higher level

magic techniques. This spell combined the techniques of fire elements, metal elements, and some transforming elements. When it shoots through the air, it makes a high-pitched sound, so I call it Whistle."

This was originally a Level-1 spell, and its original version was Vector Throw, but Link had improved and transformed it—now, it looked nothing like its predecessor.

The spell Whistle had an incredibly high speed of 650 feet per second, so its attack range was also very large.

At the same time, it also had special magical elements. Link could change its trajectory mid-flight. Of course, because the speed was very high, its magic energy would be big too, so its change in trajectory might not be as agile as that of normal elemental spells. But, it was powerful enough to kill!

Whether it was a PVP or a group battle, Whistle was at an advantage in both situations because as soon as Link willed it to, the fire element inside the metal shell would explode. In other words, it was just like a grenade with shrapnel.

After testing it out, Link was satisfied with the spell's power. Even the defenses of a Level-3 Earth Element Warrior could be suppressed by this spell.

The most critical point of the spell was its spellcasting speed. Even though this high-level spell's structure was much more complicated than normal Level-1 spells, Link was able to release it successfully in 0.2 seconds due to the number of times he had practiced it. This was mostly thanks to the aid of the game system.

With such speed and power, Whistle had become Link's new killer move.

Jacker had experienced the power of the spell himself, and there was a lingering fear inside him. Whistle? It should be called the Whistle of Death, he thought to himself.

Link laughed—he was satisfied. This spell had combined all of the insights he recently gained on magic, and after creating it, he received 5 Omni Points from the system; it was definitely a big gain.

At this point, Lucy wasn't back yet. Link was not in a rush, so he sat on a stool and chatted with Gildern. Gildern told him about the things the mercenaries heard and saw and Link explained some basic knowledge regarding magic.

Jacker listened to Link's explanation about magic while he continued to practice.

They chatted and chatted until two hours passed. But there was still no sign of Lucy.

Things started to feel anxious.

"Jacker, are you sure it's just an hour?" Link furrowed his brows slightly, it's been quite some time now.

Jacker knitted his brows, he had no heart to continue practicing. "This isn't right; Lucy has always been punctual. Even if something unexpected happened, she would send someone to inform us, especially at a time like this... could it be that something bad happened?"

Gildern's face went pale, "It couldn't be that someone from the Dark Brotherhood was exacting revenge, could it? But it can't be that bad, we are in River Cove after all!"

Even if chaos ruled outside of the town, inside, the militia was patrolling the town. Moreover, it was still daytime and Lucy wasn't a weak little girl. Who would dare to fight her?

Link stood up and said, "We'll achieve nothing just guessing here, pack everything up, we'll go to the market and ask around."

Lucy was now his follower, now that she was in trouble he had no option but to help her.

Jacker and Gildern nodded. In the fight against the Dark Brotherhood, Link had built a strong prestige among them, and now he was a lord that the two were loyal to. So now that there was a problem, the two subconsciously obeyed his words.

Chapter 55

The Syndicate

Once they put all their things away, Jacker put on his new steel armor and reached for his new steel round shield and hammer. This new set of gear, combined with his seven-foot frame, made him look as bulky and imposing as a tank. Gildern was ready with his new set of gear too.

Link changed into a lightweight leather armor so he would be able to move more freely. The three then quickly made their way to the market on the eastern side of the River Cove town.

King's Lane ran through River Cove town. It was a small town with an area of just about a square mile due of its proximity to the capital, Springs City. Hence, the town was always full of travelers from all walks of life hustling and bustling about. For this reason, Link and the mercenaries could easily blend in with the crowd. After walking for about five minutes, they reached the entrance to the town market.

There was a great deal of livestock trading in the market. It was where the farmers around the Girvent Forest came to buy or sell cattle, sheep and other livestock. These animals were of high value, so to prevent them from escaping, a wooden fence encircled the market and two militiamen guarded the market entrance. There were more patrol officers inside, policing any ruckus or commotion.

Jacker was a mercenary, so naturally, he was on good terms with the militiamen. He walked up to one of the guards and slipped a silver coin into his hand. "Jon, did anything unusual happen here today?"

"No, everything was in order, there wasn't even any bickering," replied Jon, as he shook his head and rolled over in his hand. He was politer than usual to Jacker.

"Oh, I see. Did you see Lucy?" asked Jacker.

Lucy was a beautiful woman, and she had an alluring figure. She liked to wear form-fitting leather armor because it enabled her to move much more freely, but this also meant that her luscious curves were exposed too. Because of this, she was well known

in the town, and was the woman of the single townsmen's dreams. So, everyone in town knew Lucy. Even if they'd never seen her, they had at least heard of her.

Jon knew Lucy, in fact, he was one of Lucy's greatest admirers, although Lucy herself had never spoken to him.

"I didn't see her, she didn't come here today, otherwise I would've noticed her!" said Jon, shaking his head.

The minute Jon finished his sentence, Jacker, Gildern, and Link all frowned and furrowed their brows. It seemed something terrible had really happened!

"What's the matter? Isn't she with you guys?" Jon asked nervously as he saw their reactions.

Jacker thought it was just the expression of a man worried about the woman he desired, but Link sensed there was something more.

Jon looked genuinely worried, but as he was speaking Link noticed that his eyes were looking suspicious, as if he knew something that he was not telling them.

Link immediately walked up and furtively revealed two gold coins in his hand, gleaming in its golden sheen. At the same time, Link checked the surrounding area and made sure to block other people's view to ensure that Jon was the only one who saw the gold coins.

Link asked in a low voice, "Tell me what you know Jon, and these two gold coins will be yours."

Jon was still hesitant and made no reply.

"Do you know why Lucy has always ignored you?" Link asked.

"Why?" Jon asked without thinking.

Link sneered, then said, "She once told me that you are the type of man who was unreliable and that you could never make her feel safe. I had thought that it was just an excuse, but now I know it's the truth. Even now that you know Lucy is in danger, you're only thinking about your own safety, and you still have the audacity to desire her?"

"I'm not just thinking about my own safety! Don't you know who you're messing with?" Jon retorted in shame and anger, his face reddened.

"Who?"

"...I can't say!" said Jon, stopping himself at the very last moment.

Link revealed five gleaming gold coins in his hand. Jon gulped. This was the amount of money he would earn in half a year. He looked furtively to his left and then his right, and when he was sure no one was looking, he finally said in a very low voice, "If anything happened to Lucy, it must have something to do with the Syndicate. That's all I can tell you."

After finishing his words, Jon stared wide-eyed at the gold coins in Link's hand.

Yes, Jon did like Lucy, but Lucy had always ignored him. She had somehow provoked the Syndicate's ire. She must be a dead woman by now, and in his eyes, a dead woman was much less alluring than these gold coins in front of him.

Link flung the gold coins to Jon's face, then told Jacker and Gildern, "Let's go, there's nothing more we can find out here."

If the Syndicate was the true culprit, then they must've covered their tracks well. The market was full of people going about their business, so any trace of their aura would've been drowned out, and even a low-level tracking spell would be useless here.

Link knew of the Syndicate, of course. If the Dark Brotherhood was the biggest underworld organization in the western region of Girvent Forest, then the Syndicate would be an unrivaled underworld organization in the entire human realm. They originated from the Free Trade Confederation in the South, and after a thousand years of development, they had now spread all over the human world. And there was a division of the Syndicate in the Girvent Forest which ruled over the entire southern part of the forest.

The Dark Brotherhood was like an ordinary snake, while the Syndicate was like a giant underground serpent. They had to be immensely powerful to have survived this long because different kingdoms in the realm of humans had unleashed multiple attacks on the Syndicate in attempts to eradicate them. But those attacks only resulted in brief periods of dormancy—the Syndicate always managed to somehow re-emerge and then, in a short span of time, regrow until they reached their former glory. They were

like wild weeds – neither fire nor blades could wipe them off the face of the Earth.

Link also knew that the Syndicate was as hard to get rid of as scabies because there was a figure leading the organization in the cover of darkness, an almost invincible figure with formidable strength.

This figure was the shadowy puppeteer who pulled all the strings out of everyone's sight. He was the master of thieves, the king of the Firuman Continent's underworld, and the original founder of the Syndicate – Morpheus!

Morpheus's strength was at the Legendary Pinnacle level, and some said he had even had a glimpse of the secrets of the gods. In the game, in order to ignite the Godly Fire, Morpheus joined the God of Darkness, making the Syndicate a cancerous organization associated with the Dark Side.

And because of that, Morpheus became the first final boss in the game. That year, Link had been in a group that was defeated by this boss.

Morpheus, are you already walking on that path of darkness? lamented Link, looking back on the fearsome battle in the game.

But the Girvent Forest division of the Syndicate was just a small part of the entire organization, so Link was sure he would not be facing Morpheus yet. Still, he had to admit that facing the Syndicate was an onerous task. He must plan his next moves wisely.

Obviously, Jacker and Gildern have both heard of the Syndicate too. They were both silent on their way back, lost in their own thoughts. They didn't want to give up on Lucy, no, they would never give up on her. But they were now facing such a terrifying opponent that they were at a total loss on how or even if it were possible to rescue her.

In the few minutes they spent walking, Link thought the whole incident through methodically, considering every aspect in detail.

Firstly, what exactly did the Syndicate want?

Gold coins? This might be one of their objectives, even though he doubted that the Syndicate would be so desperate for money. No one would turn down an opportunity to gain more money anyway, least of all the Syndicate.

Another thing that they might be after would have to be... Tarviss's Occultic Runes.

The Occultic Runes helped the demon Tarviss escape the sealed barrier he was imprisoned in. But because of Viktor's defeat, the Occultic Runes were now lost. And so, the powerful figure behind the Syndicate became the next slaves for the demon Tarviss.

The Occultic Runes, surely that is what they're truly after, thought Link. If that was true, then it meant that Lucy should still be alive before the Syndicate figure out the location of the Occultic Runes.

But in the meantime, they must have been torturing her to force her to reveal where the Occultic Runes were. As soon as she revealed it to them, Lucy would be swiftly killed and then a hellish storm of trouble would come after Link.

Even so, Link wouldn't blame Lucy at all if she cracked under torture because he knew that if he was caught in a similar predicament, all the secrets he held in his mind would spill out of him too.

Right now, what was most important was to locate where Lucy was and bring her back some way or another.

Link turned ideas back and forth in his mind, and once they reached the entrance of the River Cove Inn, he had already drawn up a big plan.

"Do you know where we can find a messenger to the Syndicate?" Link asked Jacker, who had been silent the whole time.

No organization was ever completely covert. Every organization would appoint an external messenger to facilitate quick and smooth communications between each division.

As a mercenary, Jacker knew the underworld much more than Link. Before working in the Girvent Forest, he naturally had to learn the rules of the turf and understand which lines he shouldn't cross. From what he'd learned, the Syndicate was the most prominent untouchable authority that no one could ever defy.

"There's someone in the River Cove Town gambling house who knows how to find them," answered Jacker.

"Then let's go to the gambling house now!"

Chapter 56

A Serendipitous Meeting

The gambling house was in the north-western part of River Cove town. It was a big two-story wooden house. It was probably the busiest and most successful business in the area. Rumors said that the gambling house was owned by the mayor's nephew, which was why they could operate in broad daylight and the militia would still never bother them.

As they entered the gambling house, Jacker and Gildern each stood on either side of Link, protecting him in the middle.

There were many people there; most of them were red-eyed gamblers. In front of each card table, there was a female dealer with a voluptuous figure wearing skimpy clothing. In every key spot of the gambling house, there were strongly built bodyguards keeping watch of any situations.

This was where prostitutes, pickpockets, cheats, crooks, and indeed the whole dregs of society mixed.

After entering the gambling house, Jacker scanned the room and walked to a table in the corner.

As he walked, he told Link, "My Lord, do you see that yellow-haired boy there? That's Jimi, rumors say he knows how to get a message to Syndicate's people."

This was definitely one of Jacker's strengths. He had been socializing with lowlifes, so he knew the ins and outs of this society very well, just the thing that Link lacked.

Link turned to where Jacker indicated and saw that Jimi wasn't participating in the card game, but was standing at the side watching. Jimi's hands and feet weren't very clean. Just as Link saw him, he was extending his hand and reached into the pockets of two gamblers.

He didn't steal much, only a few copper coins from each gambler. He was quick and discreet, like a dragonfly skimming across the water's surface.

"But he's just a pickpocket," Link said.

"Yes, but Syndicate is a group of thieves," said Gildern.

As they talked, the three walked to Jimi and surrounded him. Jimi attempted to bolt, but Jacker and Gildern had cornered him, blocking every possible escape route.

"What are you people trying to do? I'm telling you, I don't like to be pushed around." Jimi gulped. One of his hands was extending in front of his chest, and his other was grabbing at his pockets, where a dagger was hidden.

But just as his hand moved, Gildern raised a pocket knife and with lightning speed cut Jimi's wrist.

This was not a light cut, Jimi's wrist shook and he gasped. His other hand rushed to hold his cut wrist. Just like that, both of his hands were now subdued.

Link walked up to him, pointed the wooden-looking New Moon wand to Jimi's heart, the tip of the wand glowing dimly, and said, "I hear you can get a message to Syndicate?"

Link spoke with a very low voice. They didn't want to raise any commotion in the loud gambling house. The guards glanced over at their direction but saw nothing out of the ordinary, so they turned elsewhere.

In the gambling house, small disagreements were normal occurrences, they couldn't possibly check for every problem that arose. So as long as there were no big commotions, the guards wouldn't interfere.

Jimi felt differently, though. He could feel that there was something pressing on his heart. It felt a little cold and a little painful, and he saw that there was very dim light at the tip of the wand, so he was sure that this person was definitely a Magician. He was so terrified that his body shivered and his voice shook when he spoke. "Yes, yes, yes, I can send the message."

"Then tell them that I have what they want. If that woman dies or if there is even a scratch on her, then they can forget about getting it. Remember, my name is Link, and I'm a Magician. If they want to meet me, I'll be at the River Cove Inn!" Link's voice was low, but his gaze was cold as ice when he was talking. He released the Mana in his body, charging the air around him and created a noticeable air around him.

He now had close 100 Mana points and he was fully replenished. This was normal for a Level-2 Magician. If he made it visible now, it could easily shock and terrify people who were not familiar with magic, and that was enough for him.

Yellow-haired Jimi had never seen such a thing, he violently nodded and said, "I will convey your message. Now! I'll go now!"

Link then kept his aura and pointed the wand at Jimi's heart. In the dark, he cast the spell Magician 's Hand, then he penetrated Jimi's flesh and bone and grabbed at Jimi's beating heart.

Jimi could feel the horrifying sensation of his heart being gripped. He was soaked in sweat and his whole body was petrified with fear.

"Do not tell lies, and be quick. Otherwise, the magic that I planted in your heart will explode to a thousand pieces!" said Link, and then he ended his Magician 's Hand.

This spell was very useful in scaring ordinary people who were foreign to magic. If it had been a powerful Warrior, this trick would never work because the magic power in this spell was just too weak. Their body's strength alone could stop him from penetrating through their flesh and bones.

Jimi almost went crazy, then Link released him. The moment he was free he began to run, while running he said, "I will report your message immediately."

Good, now all they could do was wait.

Link said to Jacker and Gildern, "Let's go, we'll wait for the people from Syndicate at the River Cove Inn."

He knew that the powerful people behind the scenes valued the magic runes very much, and the rune was hidden by Link in his crystal pendant. It was undetectable, that was why they could never find him.

Because they couldn't find it, Link had threatened them with such bold words. They would not dare make any rash moves; the only option was to send someone to deal it.

This way, they had a chance of saving Lucy's life.

The next step would depend on the message sent by the Syndicate.

The three exited the gambling house. While on the road, Link said, "I know both of you must have some questions."

"My Lord, we'd like to know what Syndicate actually wants," asked Jacker.

Gildern was similarly curious.

Link didn't hide anything, "Remember that black crystal that Viktor had? It had a proper name, Magic Runes. I'm guessing that's what they want."

"My Lord, then should we give them this thing?" Jacker asked.

Link vehemently shook his head and said, "Absolutely not. This is an evil magic device and I have sealed it up. If this falls into their hands, it will bring misfortune to the whole Girvent Forest, no, maybe the whole Kingdom of Norton. Then, there will be a calamity that might destroy the whole Girvent Forest. If that happens, no one would be able to escape."

These were all true, technically, because if the academy was in trouble, they would lose half of the kingdom's Magicians and that would make defending against the Dark Elf Army impossible. That would then bring forth the burning of Girvent Forest to ashes. All of this had its origin in this Magic Rune.

Once they heard such terrifying catastrophes, Jacker and Gildern went silent. They knew that Link would never lie to them.

Link's face showed a cold smile, "So Jacker, Gildern, do you know the downfalls of being strong now?"

When your power was increased, you were then able to do what other people normally couldn't. These things you achieved would then attract attention from people who were as strong as you were, so you would face much more terrifying opponents.

Take eliminating the Dark Brotherhood for instance; if it was up to the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries alone, not only would they not have been able to defeat the Brotherhood, they also might not have even been able to kill Viktor. Then, they never would have touched the Magic Rune, and so would never have to deal with this present danger they were facing.

But now, everything was different.

Jacker understood what Link meant, but he chuckled and said, "My Lord, everyone has to die, the only difference is how. If I get killed by the strong opponent who used to look down on me, then that's a life well lived."

Gildern held on to the bow in his hand tightly and said, "My Lord, this is just a fact of life for a mercenary."

Link smiled, he felt he had truly chosen the right allies, "Don't worry, it's not that big a deal, we're only facing a small part of the Syndicate anyway. We defeated the Dark Brotherhood, we even killed the Occult Viktor, those hiding thieves of Syndicate can't be that hard to deal with!"

Although truth be told, there were some worrisome troubles about the Syndicate. The first was the matter of saving Lucy's life, and the second was the Syndicate's power that was spread all over the human realm. Even if they managed to destroy the Girvent Forest division of the Syndicate, that doesn't mean it would be the end of their problems.

Link would be fine; as long as he could enter the Magic Academy, he would be safe inside. But not so for Jacker and the rest. Link felt responsible for landing them into this current mess, so he thought it was his responsibility to think of an idea to decrease the risks his followers would face from the Syndicate in the future.

As for what exactly he should do, Link had no idea at the moment.

Forget it, don't think too much, when the time comes I'll find a way. Let's just take one step at a time and make sure the next step is planned properly. Right now, the most important thing is to save Lucy's life. Link tucked away all of his worries about the future and concentrated on the present most pressing problem.

When they heard what Link was saying, Jacker and Gildern both heaved a sigh of relief. Link was their main strength, their central support, and if he had confidence, then all they needed to do was follow his lead and they were sure that everything would be fine.

Just then Link heard uniform hoof beats coming from behind him. He turned around and saw a beautiful carriage being driven towards their direction.

The carriage was drawn by four beautiful Corot horses. The carriage itself was built with solid iron ebony and there were a few spots where silver runes were etched onto the carriage. The carriage was also armed with some defensive spells.

This carriage was many times more luxurious than the one Eliard was riding!

Must be some members of a noble family. Link and the rest had stepped aside to let the carriage pass. Coming from a noble family himself, he had some understanding of these luxury items that only the nobles and the upper-class people could afford.

This kind of carriage would cost at least 2000 gold coins, his old man Hamilton Morani had one too, but it only cost 300 gold coins, the one in front of him now was certainly more expensive.

River Cove town was not far from the royal capital; its views were beautiful. Important people from the city frequently came into the town for their vacations. Needless to say, carriages of this scale and caliber were not a rare sight.

Because Link's head was full of plans to rescue Lucy, he paid no heed to these nobles. He didn't notice at all how the carriage had stopped immediately after passing the three of them.

The knight who followed behind the carriage rode up to the carriage window and seemed to listen carefully to an order. Then the knight turned his horse around and rode towards Link and the two mercenaries.

Jacker and Gildern were both alarmed, and they both gripped their weapons. Link was shocked too, but he didn't panic. He touched them both on their shoulders and reassured the two mercenaries, "Don't worry, there won't be trouble."

And then, he stepped forward.

The knight quickly reached Link, and then condescendingly he shouted, "Young man, report your name."

Link did not immediately answer, he thoroughly scanned the knight in front of him. He was wearing carved silver plate armor and a sky-blue shirt, and on his chest, there was an imprint of a roaring lion – a family crest.

In the Norton Kingdom, a roaring male lion was a symbol of the royal family of Abel.

That meant the knight in front of him was a high-ranking knight serving directly under the king, and the person in the carriage must also be an important figure too—probably a member of the royal family.

Link didn't know why the knight would want his name, but he gave his usual answer, "I am Link Morani, son of Viscount Hamilton Morani."

He had to mention his own noble family name. When interacting with the nobles, he found that they would communicate better with him if he demonstrated himself to be one of them.

As expected, the moment he mentioned his father's name the knight's hard gaze softened. At the same time, a soft voice was heard from the carriage.

The voice was barely audible, but incredibly familiar. Link instantly knew who was inside the carriage. It was Annie Abel, the Iron Duke's only daughter, and King Leon's own niece.

The only trouble was, shouldn't she be in Gladstone? What was she doing here in River Cove Town?

Chapter 57

A Formidable Ally

Ten minutes later, Link and Annie reached the River Cove Inn.

Because Annie was a royal Princess, they couldn't stay in the hall, as it might attract too much attention. So, they gathered on the second floor in the private sitting room of the inn's best suite. Apart from Link and Annie, the knight who had asked for Link's name earlier was there too. His name was Anderson.

In the meantime, Jacker and Gildern remained in the hall downstairs, awaiting the message from the Syndicate.

"Why did you leave before even saying goodbye earlier?" asked Annie.

Annie was clad in a light azure leather armor. She stared fixedly at Link, anticipating his reply. Her deep blue eyes were tinged with signs of anger.

When they met on the streets, she was heading to the capital on royal summons. After the carnage in Gladstone, her father and even King Leon himself had been paying close attention to the matter of the Dark Elf invasion. And because Annie was directly involved in the incident herself, she was called to the capital to report to the king.

Link sighed. He never thought that he would meet this future Legendary Assassin after having escaped so far from Gladstone. He couldn't help but be amazed at such a remarkable coincidence.

In Gladstone, the constant threat from the Dark Elf Assassins had kept Link on his toes so he was perpetually on the move, afraid to linger in one place for too long. But now he was in River Cove Town, a town in the heart of the Norton Kingdom far from any foreign threats. Plus, he had since managed to learn more higher-level spells. So all the apprehensions and anxieties he felt in Gladstone had been sloughed off.

Link pondered for a few seconds, then came up with an idea for a suitable explanation for Annie.

"I guess you're wondering how a Magician's Apprentice could use such a high-level spell as Flame Blast?" said Link, with a laugh.

Annie's attention was grabbed by these words. This was exactly what she had been curious about. Anderson's interest was similarly piqued. He'd always assumed that this young man was just another nobleman's son, or that he was just a regular Magician's Apprentice. He was surprised to find that Link was skillful enough to use such a powerful spell as a Level-4 Flame Blast!

How old is he? He doesn't look any older than 16 or 17! Shouldn't young Magician's Apprentices of this age only know some Level-0 spells? the knight wondered.

And so, under Annie's and Anderson's curious gaze, Link began his explanation that he filled with necessary half-truths.

"I was not capable of casting Flame Blast at first. In fact, the highest-level spells I knew were just some Level-2 spells. But after defeating the Magician Holmes, I went back to the Flemmings Academy and found three Flame Blast magic scrolls there. The power of those scrolls was too powerful for my level, though, so they backfired on me. My body weakened drastically after using them, even to the point where I couldn't cast any spells. You know how dangerous things were in Gladstone. I wouldn't have lasted a minute there in my weakened state. So, in the end, I had no choice but to escape south as quickly and discreetly as I could—before I had a chance to say goodbye to you," said Link, carefully going through each word.

He thought his explanation did make sense. There might have been discrepancies at some points, but Flemmings Academy had been burnt to the ground, so there was no way for anyone to invalidate him.

Annie completely bought into Link's explanation because she thought he had no reason to lie to her. Still, she couldn't help feeling unnerved by Link's actions.

"But you should've told me about it, I would've sent people to protect you and made sure you escaped safely to the South," said Annie.

Tsk, she's being frivolous, how annoying! Link was in a dilemma. Not only was Annie a Princess, she was also a friend. Link understood that she was only acting out of concern, so he couldn't just give her a cold shoulder. And so, he had no choice but to keep on explaining patiently.

"It's fine, because I had found a secret escape route. I reached Girvent Forest safely by midday on the same day," said Link.

With Celine's flying speed, it only took three hours to traverse the distance of a thousand miles between Gladstone and Girvent Forest.

Annie had no more bones to pick with Link, but she still couldn't accept the fact that Link left Gladstone without telling her first. It felt as if Link didn't even care about her feelings... wait, what a strange thought that was! Why would Link care about her feelings?

She was completely thrown off balance once she discovered the reason behind her vexation, and the anger in her heart was gone. She quickly tried to regain her composure.

"I saw you looking distressed in the streets, and your two friends looked distraught too. Has anything terrible happened?" asked Annie.

Heaven knows how ardently Link had been waiting for this question.

Annie had the power to rally up considerable strengths behind her. Link was also on fairly good terms with her, so he'd hoped that she might be willing to lend a hand in his fight against the Syndicate.

It wasn't that Link was afraid of facing the Syndicate alone, though. The trouble was the fact that the Syndicate's influence and power had spread all around the human world, so even if he managed to destroy their Girvent Forest division, he would then be faced with wave after wave of counterattacks.

There was a saying that went, 'it is possible to be a thief for a thousand days, but it is impossible to defend against the thieves for the same length of time'. You are much more likely to crumble and fail from passive defense than active offense. Link would hate having to defend himself against the Syndicate for the rest of his life.

But if he was able to get Princess Annie's help, even if the Syndicate discovered that Link had defeated one of their divisions, they would still be helpless against the strength of a nation's army, and thus be much more reluctant to retaliate.

With Annie's help, Link could shift the risks to the Syndicate instead.

And so, Link laid bare everything he'd faced in the River Cove Town for Annie to hear, starting from his meeting with the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries, to their fight against the Dark Brotherhood in pursuit of their gold coins. Then he told Annie about Viktor's hidden treasures and then the Syndicate's discovery of their possession of the hidden treasures, and finally of Lucy's kidnapping. The only thing Link left out was the matter of the Occultic Runes.

He was sure that he could keep the existence of the Occultic Runes a secret from Annie and her company. The Syndicate would never mention it because it was a forbidden item in the Realm of Light. Jacker and Gildern were both his followers, so they wouldn't reveal it either.

Once Link finished his story, Annie turned to Anderson and said, "General, the Syndicate is getting too bold. They dared to cause such trouble even in a town so near to Springs City. Things might turn as bad as it did in Gladstone if nothing is done to keep them in check. Isn't it time we cleanse the kingdom of this dirty group of thieves?"

Everybody knew that the Syndicate was a poisonous and dangerous organization. In fact, every kingdom in the Realm of Light had attempted to destroy the Syndicate, although none of the attempts had any permanent effect. But now that Princess Annie was ordering it, General Anderson was naturally fired up with enthusiasm.

"Yes, your Highness," said Anderson in a solemn voice. He placed his right hand on his heart. "I will rally up the militia in River Cove Town immediately."

"Good. You may go now. The sooner the matter is settled, the better." Annie maintained a cool and haughty facade as she talked to Anderson.

Anderson bowed one more time and walked out of the sitting room in long strides.

Once the door was closed, Annie and Link were alone in the room.

Link's mind was filled with thoughts about the Syndicate, so he felt antsy sitting still in the room doing nothing.

"Princess—" he began after a few silent minutes had passed.

"Just call me Annie, the way you did in Gladstone," Annie interjected.

"Alright, Annie, then," said Link, "The Syndicate's message could arrive anytime now, should we move to the hall and wait for it there?"

Jacker and Gildern were both in the hall, but those two had been scared stiff by the thought of facing such an opponent as the Syndicate. Link thought it best for him to be there with them.

"Alright, let's go," replied Annie.

They both stood up and headed for the door, but just as Link's hand was about to reach the doorknob, he heard Annie's soft voice coming from behind him.

"Is Lucy pretty?" she asked.

What kind of a question is that? Link wondered. He stood there in confused silence for a few seconds.

"She's alright," Link finally replied.

"Oh, prettier than me?" asked Annie again.

"You're both... uh... no, not as pretty as you are, of course," said Link. He finally caught the meaning behind the strange tone in Annie's voice. Could it be that Annie had fallen for him? But that's impossible, they've seen each other for the total of two hours, what kind of feelings could develop that fast?

To be frank, Link thought of Annie as a friend and nothing more. She might be a Princess, and a pretty one at that, but she was just not his type. He had to be careful with what he said, though, lest he hurt her feelings. He didn't want to risk that, for fear that it might influence her decision to help him fight against the Syndicate.

"Lucy is my follower," said Link, as he quickly turned around to face Annie, "We had fought together in battles, so if something happened to her, or even to Jacker or Gildern, I would do anything in my power to help them. Lucy's looks have nothing to do with any of this. It is what I must do to fulfill my obligations as their lord," explained Link in earnest.

Both lord and follower had their own responsibilities and duties to uphold. Once they were sworn to each other, the followers must be loyal to their lord, and in turn, the lord had the duty to protect his followers' interests. If a follower died fighting for him,

then the lord must arrange proper funeral rites for the follower so that his other followers won't lose their faith in him.

As expected, Annie brightened up the moment she heard Link's explanation. Her footsteps quickened and she caught up behind Link. Her attitude was noticeable more positive too.

"If you have trouble entering the academy, I can write you a recommendation letter. My father has a friend who's a powerful Level-6 Magician. He's also a tutor at the East Cove Magic Academy. He will take you under his wing as soon as my father orders it. With your talents, he would be more than happy to accept you as his student. I'll let it pass this time, but you must let me help you if you're ever in trouble next time," said Annie.

"I'll remember that," replied Link.

And so Link opened the door and the two exited the room. But before they went any further, they bumped into Jacker at the stairs.

"My Lord, there was a letter from the Syndicate," he said.

"What did it say?" asked Link, his face stony.

"They demanded us to meet them at the Red Leaves Cove, south of River Cove Town, before three o'clock in the afternoon, bringing... gold coins in exchange for Lucy's safety," said Jacker. He saw Annie there and thought it unwise to mention the crystal in front of an outsider, so he changed it to 'gold coins' instead.

Annie didn't catch anything suspicious in Jacker's tone, she only frowned in anger and said, "Has the Syndicate's power grown to such an extent in the Girvent Forest? It seems that I've arrived at the right time!"

Jacker didn't quite understand what Annie meant, so he looked to Link for an explanation.

"Princess Annie will help us rescue Lucy. General Anderson has gone to town to rally up the militia on her orders," said Link.

Jacker perked up instantly. With the help of the royal family, the Syndicate's threats now appeared much less terrifying. It seemed that there was a chance that Lucy could

be saved. Still, he was amazed to learn that his Lord was acquainted with a royal Princess and was on such good terms with her too!

Link turned to Annie and said, "Annie, the most important thing right now is to save Lucy, we can think of destroying the Syndicate later. We can't make too much commotion right now, lest they might uncover our plans. I'm planning to go there with Gildern and Jacker, then you and the rest can quietly follow along later—"

"No, I'll go with you now, Anderson will wait here to make further plans and follow us later. And don't try to stop me, it's too dangerous for you to fight alone. You saved my life in Gladstone once, so let me help you now," said Annie, looking resolute.

"All right." Link knew there was no point in arguing the matter, so he only nodded.

And so, Annie quickly wrote a letter, and told her servant to send it to Anderson.

"Let's get going," she said, "We'll ride my horses!"

Chapter 58

What a Tenacious Young Lady

The Red Leaves Cove was about two miles north of River Cove town. There were many maple trees in the area and every fall season the whole cove would be covered in red leaves, giving it its name.

The shape of the cove was long and narrow, with a small stream flowing through the middle. Because it was fall, the stream was almost dried up, exposing a big area of the riverbanks.

In a grove beside the riverbank, stood a solitary log cabin.

Surrounding the log cabin was a thick blanket of darkness. These were where all the thieves of the Syndicate hid. They were experts of camouflage. Even the birds, and other small creatures there had no idea of their presence.

The interior of the log cabin was sparse. Hanging in the middle of the room were two iron chains where Lucy's hands were each hung. Her hair was messy, the leather armor was stripped off from her body, and her whole naked body was marked with bruises and bloodstains from lashings. In some places, her skin was whipped into minced meat; you could almost see the bones inside.

The Syndicate had always been extremely brutal in the treatment of their captives. Lucy had only been captured two hours ago, but already they had tortured her to the brink of death.

A dark shadow stood at the corner – this was the executioner in charge.

"Well, pretty lady, are you still unwilling to speak?" His voice was exceptionally calm and gentle, it sounded like he was conversing with old friends.

Lucy's head drooped weakly, she let her fiery red hair fall on her face. Streams of blood trickled down her body, forming pools of blood on the floor.

Once she heard the voice of the dark shadow, her body automatically started to shiver.

In the past two hours, every time the voice emerged, it was accompanied quickly after with whips.

As expected, a black whip conjured out of the darkness like a venomous snake from the dark shadow's hand. Smack! It hit Lucy's chest, and the whip coiled back immediately, bringing with it a piece of her flesh.

The thrashing this time was especially heavy-handed. With an incredible force, the whip penetrated Lucy's chest. Lucy felt a sweet taste in her throat as blood rushed up, but she swallowed and forced it back down.

Her face contorted slightly, then it carved out a wry smile, "Don't you have any other tricks apart from whips?" Lucy said weakly.

Lucy could handle the pain just fine. She had been a mercenary for such a long time and had suffered through much worse than this. Once, they were catching magma spiders on the volcano of Blackstone Hill in the North. The fire spider had spurted its acidic saliva on Lucy and the pain she felt then was immeasurable—she could recall it vividly even now.

But she didn't make a peep from that kind of pain, so even if the whip was doused with salt water, it would still be nothing she couldn't bear!

As soon as she finished the sentence, the whip came again. This time it was on her face. But because her thick layers of red hair covered her face, the whipping was not so bad, but still, it did leave a deep bloody line.

"Why do you have to keep it a secret?" the black shadow's voice finally showed a slight change in tone, "If it's money you want, I can give you 1000 gold coins right now, you can take the money and go wherever you want, and live the rest of your life in luxury...."

"Stop dreaming!" Lucy spat out blood in the direction of the corner, "I'll come back and kill you all!"

She was no damsel in distress who could do nothing but cry and wait to be rescued. Her nickname among the mercenaries was Fire Rose. She would pay whatever debt was due, whether it was a debt of gratitude or revenge. She vowed that if she ever escaped this place, she would come back and repay what these cowards hiding in shadows did to her in kind!

"I hate to disappoint you, but you will never live to do so. No one will come to save you. I should, perhaps, inform you that we are members of the Syndicate. Your two mercenary friends stand no chance against us, not that they would even risk it, hehe," the black shadow mirthlessly laughed, and continued, "After all, your torture has only just begun. If you don't talk now, I will teach you what hell on Earth is like!"

The moment she heard the word Syndicate, her heart sank. Of course, she knew the Syndicate. It was a venomous snake entrenched in the Firuman continent. The southern part of Girvent Forest was their main territory.

Their power far outweighed that of the Dark Brotherhood by ten, maybe a hundred times over. This is much beyond what the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had the capability of fighting against. Even if Jacker and Gildern came to save her, they would only be meeting their end here.

If the one who captured her was the Syndicate, then it seemed she had no chance to survive after all.

She laughed bitterly, in her mind there flashed a picture of a thin and frail figure – that of the genius young Magician. The Lord she had just recently sworn her allegiance to; would he come and save her?

She wasn't sure.

In her memories, the young man's attitude had always been calm and indifferent. His eyes did not seem to ever move; they were dark and black, deep and quiet, as if nothing would ever rouse his feelings.

When she cleaned his room, he never even set his eyes on her. Her sensational figure, her beautiful face, none of it ever attracted him. His eyes were forever fixed on his spells and magic. The most reaction she got was a simple "thank you" when she was done, and nothing more.

For such an impassive person, she could in no way discern what kind of place she had in his heart and mind, but, she guessed, she probably wasn't all that important to him.

Ah, I was planning to focus on my Battle Art practice the next few days. But I guess I won't ever have the chance to do it now, Lucy sighed internally.

A brilliant path lay right in front of her, but just as she was stepping up to it, right at

the last moment, a venomous snake jumped out and bit her. And now, everything crumbled, all that was left was darkness.

"Do you get it now?" in the corner, the dark shadow spoke once again.

Lucy bit down on her lips, shook her head, "I will never tell you."

Syndicate's power was huge, even if her Lord Link was a powerful Magician, it was possible that even he might not be able to defeat them. It would be understandable for him to not come and save her, but she could never break her oath and betray him.

"What a tenacious young lady. I do admire you, haha." Out walked a figure from the dark corner, his features were gradually emerging, and this person was dressed like a typical thief—masked, and clad in brown leather armor. His left hand was carrying a whip dripping with blood, and his right hand was holding a sharp dagger.

He threw the leather whip away, then swung the dagger around, and with silent steps walked up to Lucy. He reached out his hand and lifted Lucy's chin, then laughed and said, "Do you see this dagger? It's called Dissector."

As he was speaking, he traced a circle on Lucy's breast with the dagger. His voice became even more gentle as he said, "It is exceptionally sharp. For those who refuse to cooperate, I will cut open their flesh bit by bit. I will cut open their chest, so they can see their hearts beating. Then I will cut open their guts, so they can see their own livers, intestines and the rest. But don't worry, I will be very gentle, so it won't hurt too much, and you won't die quickly."

"You're a demon!" Lucy finally felt a real terror. She never feared death, but she did fear this horrifying torture.

"Thank you for that compliment," said the thief, smiling cruelly. His eyes were extraordinarily cold, "Now, this is your last chance. Will you speak, or will you stay silent?"

For an instant, there was hesitation in Lucy's mind, but she forced it away quickly. She bit her lips and said, "I'd rather die. Then I'll be up there in the kingdom of gods looking down on you as you're going to hell!"

"Ahhh" the thief sighed, the dagger slowly approaching and was about to pierce through Lucy's bloody chest.

But right at this moment, someone knocked on the door, and a voice from outside said, "My Lord, the River Cove town mercenaries have sent a message."

The thief immediately stopped his actions, put the dagger away, and patted Lucy's face. "Oh, so your comrades have come to die. They are just as stupid as you are."

As he spoke, the thief opened the wooden door and walked out.

Lucy's eyes suddenly sparkled. Is he here to save me?

She knew Jacker and Gildern well enough to know that they would definitely come to rescue her, but they had no way of finding her this fast. The only person who could figure out where she was taken and send a messenger in this short period of time was Link.

In this moment, a mixture of emotions churned inside her—there was joy, worry, and gratitude. In her mind, the figure of that young Magician had now become clearer and clearer.

...

Outside the log cabin.

As Andy heard the message from his underling, his brows furrowed. Why would there be a Magician among them? Damn it all!

They demanded Lucy be safe and without harm, but she had been beaten until her whole body was bloodied and bruised. This could pose some problems. He contemplated and said, "Go tell them to come to the Red Leaves Cove."

"Yes, my Lord." The thief turned around and left.

Andy stared at the back of the thief and thought, Normal people wouldn't know about Magic Runes and they certainly wouldn't dare touch it. Only Magicians know its true value. It seems it really has fallen into the hands of a Magician. Ha! Only three of them, and they still want to fight me, what idiots!

Andy then whistled, and not long after, a black shadow appeared from the bushes. "My Lord, what are your orders?"

"Assemble all Night Blade members and tell them to wear their anti-magic armor and carry their anti-magic daggers! And bring me my anti-magic gear!" Andy ordered.

"Yes, my Lord."

Mockingly, Andy said, "A Magician? Let's see what you can do."

Chapter 59

Let Magic Roar! (1)

Thirty minutes after receiving the letter from the Syndicate, Link, Annie, and the two mercenaries had reached the opening of the Red Leaves Cove on horseback.

It was late fall and the cove was awash with fiery red maple leaves. Weeds and shrubs thronged the spaces between the maple trees. Except for the stream that flowed through the middle of the cove, the whole place was full of nooks and crannies where the thieves of the Syndicate could be lying in wait. If they barged into the cove without prior planning or preparation, just one misstep and they could easily be surrounded and captured.

A narrow, craggy path ran through the middle of the cove. It was too small for the horses to trot on, so they had to dismount their horses and walk from there.

Jacker walked in front with his shield raised, Annie was at Link's left side, and Gildern walked behind him. As they entered the cove, Link saw a notification popped up on the interface.

New Mission Series Activated: Venomous Snake in the Girvent Forest!

First Mission: Rescue.

Mission Details: Rescue Lucy who was captured and tortured by the Syndicate.

Mission Rewards: 20 Omni Points.

Link accepted the mission without hesitation. He now had 14 Omni Points, while his Mana was almost full at 96 points. His Glass Orbs only consumed 1 Mana point each, and his Level-1 spell Whistle only needed 4 Mana points. All in all, he had more than enough resources to put up a good fight against the Syndicate.

Their visibility in the woods was very limited, so to protect themselves against sneak attacks, Link used the Aura Detection spell on his eyes in order to see everything's Innate Aura. Non-living things and plants had stable and unmoving auras, but animals

and humans were covered in auras that actively moved and vibrated.

The auras that the three people beside him emitted were both intense and energetic. Jacker's aura was yellow, and it shone the most intensely. This meant that his Combat Aura was the most powerful. Annie's aura was grey, which came from the energy of shadows that Assassins possessed. But what surprised him the most was Gildern's luminous green aura, which was the color of the wind element.

Gildern's green aura was much brighter and more intense than what Link had seen previously. It seemed that even though he hadn't cast the Hidden Power spell on Gildern yet, he had been practicing his skills according to the Battle Art techniques that Jacker had shared with him. He managed to achieve impressive progress just from that.

After walking for about five minutes, Link saw a flash of aura behind a large boulder that was about 160 feet away—he immediately knew that it was a scout sent by the Syndicate.

The scout was a bit far from them, and he was hiding in an inconspicuous spot, so Annie and the mercenaries did not notice him. Nevertheless, nothing could escape the eyes of a Magician!

Right now, they had absolutely no idea of what to expect in the Red Leaves Cove, but now fate had provided them with someone to interrogate. So Link grabbed the opportunity and began to make the first move. Mana flowed into Link's wand and it vibrated slightly, then a light blue glass orb started to form.

"Go!" Link pointed the wand at the big boulder, and the glass orb whistled through the air in a high-pitched screech—in less than a second it traversed more than 160 feet. Just before it hit the stone, it changed its trajectory abruptly and circled around the boulder.

Bang! From the distance, they could hear a howl of pain coming from behind the boulder. The Glass Orb had successfully hit its target!

Jacker and Gildern were used to seeing Link's magic in action by now, so they weren't stirred by it much. But it was Annie's first time.

"Link," she exclaimed, "What was that spell? How could it work at such a huge distance?"

She was much more knowledgeable about magic than the mercenaries, so she knew that normal elemental spells could only work at a distance of no more than 100 to 130 feet, but Link had just unleashed a spell that worked at 200 feet!

"It's Fireball, but I've modified it," Link explained while signaling the rest to head towards the boulder, "Do you still remember the Dark Elf Magician in Gladstone who cast a spell that worked at a large distance too? I used the same technique he did."

"Is it Supreme Magical Skill?" asked Annie. She was beginning to understand Link's powers.

But the more she understood it, the more stunned she was by it. Link must now have a deep understanding of the workings of magic to be able to modify spells with Supreme Magical Skills. Moreover, she knew that the process of modifying a spell, even a Level-0 spell, was arduous and time-consuming. Some Level-6 Magicians might need months to perfect a stable modified spell.

Annie remembered clearly that Link did not have this skill when they were in Gladstone. But it had only been barely more than a month since then and he had managed to achieve such vast progress—what level of talent was she witnessing here? If she had seen Link's whistle, she would've been in for a bigger shock.

Link didn't have the time to explain, so he only nodded in reply to Annie's question.

The four checked behind the boulder and saw a man clad in a greyish brown leather armor writhing on the ground in pain. His left arm had been blown off his shoulder by the Glass Orb.

There were characters in movies on Earth who could still run around after their arms had been blown off. But in reality, the pain of limbs getting amputated was unimaginably debilitating. The wounded thief now had a deathly pale face, and he couldn't stop wailing. Not only was he unable get up and run, he couldn't even manage to keep himself conscious.

Jacker walked up to the thief and tore up a piece of cloth from the thief's underclothes, then wrapped it around the stub of his arm to prevent further blood loss. Then he slapped the thief twice in the face, and the thief immediately swallowed his cries and came to his senses.

Link took a step towards the thief and pointed his wand at his skull. A faint icy aura

appeared at the tip of the wand. "Tell me, where is the woman held?"

This was just a Level-1 thief, not much different from any other common folk, so he was easily awed and stunned by signs of magic. Naturally, Link's threatening method worked well with him.

"She's... she's in the cabin on the Silverfish riverbank," said the thief laboriously due to the pain.

"Silverfish riverbank?" Link had never heard of the place.

"My Lord, I know the place," said Jacker.

Link was relieved. This would make their mission much easier.

"Who ordered the kidnapping?" Link asked the thief.

"It...It was Andy. He's a Level-3 Assassin, a terrifying person," said the thief, gulping. He was hesitant to answer Link's questions but was even more scared of the magic coming from the wand.

Andy? Link blinked a few times while recalling where he had heard such a familiar name. It was in the game. Andy was one of the members of Morpheus's core group, and the first boss a player would encounter in the mission to defeat Morpheus. When he was playing the game, Andy was already a Level-5 Assassin.

Link was surprised to learn that Andy was only a leader of the small Girvent Forest division of the Syndicate now.

Andy had no particular strength or power that stood out in the game, the only thing that was infamous about him was his ruthlessness and cruelty, as well as the fact that he was a perverted man through and through. If he was a man from Earth, he would have been a sadistic and psychopathic serial-killer, like Leatherface of the movie Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

The thing that worried Link the most right now was how wealthy and powerful the Syndicate was in comparison to the Dark Brotherhood. They would be able to afford a myriad of special equipment and potions, so even though Andy's own strength might not be that impressive, with some aid he could still be a terrifying opponent.

"What schemes did they set up in the cove?" asked Link. He feared for Lucy's life now because he knew that Andy's brutality was something not to be trifled with.

"I don't know, I'm just a lowly thief, please have mercy," said the thief, his face contorting in pain.

Link could sense that he really didn't know, so he didn't wait for him to finish talking before using Magician's Hand to break his neck. It was war between them and the Syndicate the moment they captured Lucy. Should he have granted the thief mercy and let him go back to report on them? Absolutely not!

"Let's go now! To the Silverfish riverbank!" Jacker knew the place, so he lead the way. Along the way, Link used the Aura Detection spell and he uncovered three more scouts. He attacked each one with his Glass Orbs, interrogated them, and finally killed them all!

By the time the Silverfish riverbank emerged on the horizon, they had formed a rough idea of what to expect from the opponent.

Andy would not be there waiting for them. He had assembled elite members of the Syndicate, armed them with special gear, and ordered them to lie in wait near the cabin, ready to ambush them.

As for what kind of special gear it was, Link had no doubt that it was one that was often used to fight against Magicians – anti-magic armor.

The four walked along the rugged path until a cabin on the riverbank came into their view. The information they gained from their interrogations was that Lucy was held inside the cabin, but the moment they reached there, they were faced, instead, with an atrocious scene.

Lucy was not inside the cabin; she was dangling from a tree outside the cabin. Her arms were hung in chains and her body was stripped naked and covered with bloody lacerations all over. Thick blood still dripped slowly from her toes down to the ground. From afar, she seemed completely lifeless, and her head hung down limply from her shoulders while her face was covered by her red hair. It wasn't clear at all whether she was still alive. It was an abhorring sight!

Jacker's face reddened, and he gripped the hammer in his hand so tightly that it squeaked. Gildern gritted his teeth in silent wrath. Even an outsider like Annie was

enraged.

"Those savages!" said Annie, "We must make them pay for what they did in kind!"

There didn't seem to be any changes in Link's expression, but his eyes had grown much darker and his breathing had slowed down considerably—he was already in the focused state of spellcasting!

Lucy was still alive, Link could sense that through Aura Detection. But now Andy's barbaric schemes had managed to ignite the flame of fury in him, and this flame could only be extinguished by Andy's blood!

"You'll get a taste of my magic powers, just you wait and see," said Link, as Mana surged through his body.

Chapter 60

Let Magic Roar! (2)

At least twenty elite members of the Syndicate lay in ambush around the log cabin, or to be more precise, around Lucy.

These elite members were clad in anti-magic armor and armed with various expensive anti-magic gear that would completely mask their Innate Auras. There was a downside to this though. Everything in the universe emits Innate Aura, the masked auras of the thieves would create a black outline against a backdrop of Innate Aura emitted by everything else in its surroundings.

The Syndicate was well aware of this point, though, and they had a countermeasure against it. Apart from the anti-magic armor, they would also hide behind a barricade made of thick wooden planks; it was built like a small, triangular, wooden hut. The exterior of the barricade would be covered with sticks and grass, making it even harder to tell apart.

Additionally, the thick planks of wood would be covered with more anti-magic armor. This way, average-level spells were obstructed from being able to penetrate the barricade.

These arrangements clearly exposed Andy's defensive tactics.

"I used Lucy to taunt you. And I didn't kill her to let you think up of ways to rescue her, just so I can aggravate you!"

If infuriating Link and the rest was Andy's goal, then he had definitely achieved it.

In the hiding place, Link laid out his plans, "Lucy is still alive. Jacker, you protect me. Gildern, you are to kill those that survive, and Annie, you sneak in there and rescue Lucy.

His tone was as usual, very plain and calm, but Jacker who was familiar with him could detect a certain coldness in it. There was an air of bloodthirstiness and ruthlessness around him; that surge of magic aura around Link made his hair stand on its end.

He immediately nodded, "Understood."

Gildern inhaled deeply, then nodded and said, "Yes, my Lord."

Annie felt a kind of psychological oppression, she subconsciously obeyed Link's words and said, "Understood."

Link put away his New Moon wand and decided to instead use the superior Fire Crystal staff!

Annie knew what happened in Gladstone, so he had no need to hide his true power.

The moment the Fire Crystal staff appeared, the fist-sized flame crystal at the tip glowed a blazing red. It was influenced by Link's burning fury, and this light was burning brilliantly just like a flame.

But even though his heart was in fury, Link's mind was still in pristine order; his concentration was perfectly in focus, time slowed down in his mind, and everything in his surroundings became calm and quiet.

Massacre, begin!

With the staff in his hand, Link violently shot up from the hiding spot. Jacker immediately followed behind him and with his shield raised high, he protected Link from the arrows shooting from the dark.

Gildern stood on the other side of Link, his hand holding a fine quality mulberry wood longbow, and nocked his steel arrows. He actively searched for targets in the dark.

Then, Link's magic began to roar!

The thieves, wearing anti-magic gear, hid behind their barricades and taunted Lucy. This sparked something in Link as he prepared to cast a spell.

Whistle

Level-1 Modified Mixed Spell

Mana Consumption: 4

Effects: With Vector Throw as its foundation, a mix of metal and fire energy form a high-speed, rotating spear. IT contains extreme levels of penetrating and explosive energy.

(Note: As the whistle blows, the God of Death closely follows.)

Link held iron filings in his palm and threw them into the air in front of him. Less than a second later, the first Whistle took form and flew towards the area where Link detected Innate Aura.

This target was about 160 feet away. That distance might be too great for the average Magician, but for Link's modified spell Whistle, it wasn't far enough!

Barely half a second later, this high-speed rotating spike threaded through the trees, avoiding them by a hair's breadth, then penetrated through the thick barricade.

The barricade was about an inch thick; it was enough to block normal Level-1 Fireball attacks, but it was simply no match for a spell like Whistle.

Bang! Whistle penetrated the barricade and reached the sealed space inside the planks.

Three Assassins crouched on the ground behind the barricade. This tactic of having three people hiding in one place was to prevent being ambushed in the dark. It was one of Andy's schemes, a clever one at that, but it had actually sped up his own defeat.

The spike of death easily penetrated the barricade and on impact, the fiery core inside the metal shell immediately exploded.

When Level-1 fire element spells explode, its explosive power was about equivalent to that of a hand grenade on Earth—if grenades were covered with an iron shell.

Bang! The spell exploded and flames flew and scattered. The metal shrapnel shot through the air in all four directions and the Syndicate Assassins inside had nowhere to hide from it all.

The anti-magic leather armor on their bodies had the ability to block the damage from the flames for about a minute. That was at least enough not to render them incapacitated. But how much could leather armors protect, ultimately? When faced with the flying shrapnel, these Assassins were as vulnerable as newborn babies.

Andy was the Syndicate's division leader. He never actively took part in battles and had always been hiding from afar observing. He heard a magic explosion and immediately turned to its direction.

It's a Fire Spell, looking at the power, it must be Fireball. Night Blade members could definitely survive this, Andy deduced from his past experiences.

The Fireball spell was made purely of the fire element; the damage from the flames must have been minimal because every Night Blade member wore anti-magic leather armor.

Just as he was making these conclusions, he heard eight explosions just within three seconds!

This was exactly the number of hiding spots that he planted around Lucy where the Assassins lay in ambush.

Then, the cove quieted down.

Andy was full of confidence that his underlings could stand up and fight, but then, he saw the Magician who was the cause of all the commotion. He was standing at the riverbanks behind the grove with only a Warrior holding a shield and an Archer by his side to protect him. At this moment, had there still been some Assassins alive, just ten of them charging at the three would have successfully captured them.

After capturing them, he was sure that his torture methods could make anyone blurt all their secrets out.

But after the commotion, one second, two seconds, then three seconds passed, and the hiding spots were still quiet and motionless. Andy's heart began to sink.

After the barricades erupted in flames, there was some screaming, but none of the Assassins inside stood up and came out to fight. In fact, the screams only lasted momentarily. The wooden planks which the Assassins used to hide behind had been destroyed to pieces, while Gildern shot his arrows at the surviving Assassins who did not die in the explosions. None had survived.

After only a couple seconds, 22 Night Blade Elite Assassins perished. They were dead before they even understood what happened to them.

Andy's face became very pale. He looked at his two underlings beside him—these two were both crouching on the ground, silent, and one of them was trembling. They had been scared out of their wits.

He then looked at the surviving Night Blade members; they all had no choice but to retreat hastily.

What kind of spell did he use? What terrifying power he has! Andy couldn't find an explanation for what was happening. This was beyond what he knew about magic!

Then, he suddenly saw a black shadow appear beside Lucy. It shot two darts, cutting the cord that held Lucy, causing her to fall, but the shadow caught her before she hit the ground. Then, Lucy was carried on the shadow's back and they both escaped.

The shadow's speed left Andy shocked. That speed, only a Level-3 Assassin could do that! But why would there be a Level-3 Assassin among them?

He had investigated it earlier and found out that they only consisted of three people: one was a Level-3 Warrior, and the rest were just average Level-2 fighters. The Magician who was with them was not even able to enter East Cove Higher Magic Academy!

How could a Magician that wasn't even accepted by the academy be so strong? They had defeated the Dark Brotherhood, but what puzzled Andy was, firstly, how could the Dark Brotherhood be so weak, and secondly, what kind of spells did the Magician use?

In the Cove of Echoes, the black-robed Magician did say that he did not discover any trace of high-level spells being used there. The highest level spell used was only Level-1.

Andy had planned his tactics today based on that information. But now he realized how wrong he had been.

"My Lord, what should we do now?" asked his right-hand man in a low voice.

Andy was sweating in fear. He glanced at the Magician on the riverbanks and just at that moment, Link saw him too, as if he had discovered his location. Andy began to panic.

"Retreat! Retreat! I won't fight those people!"

They were just a band of thieves—all they ever did was collect money and do errands. Now that their lives were in danger, there was no point in doing any favors for anyone.

So Andy lead the surviving Night Blade members and escaped the Silverfish riverbanks.

He was quick, and he was familiar with the twists and turns of the Red Leaves Cove, so in no time at all, they were far away from the Silverfish riverbank.

However, when he turned a corner, he bumped into a person standing in the middle of the path. He knew this person; it was the black-robed Magician who was the messenger from the main division of Syndicate.

"When did you get here?" Andy asked, shock evident in his voice.

The black-robed Magician said with a croaky voice, "I'm here to help you fight that Magician."

"You're going to fight him yourself?" Andy was both surprised and happy, although, in his memory, this Magician had never been one to dirty his own hands.

"This Magician is worthy of my time!" The black-robed Magician gently waved the wand in his hand. The wand was made of pure Mithril, and embedded in the tip of the wand was a goose egg-sized, deep blue, magic gemstone glowing in a light blue magic light.

Then he followed his exclamation closely with, "But he's very strong, so we'll have to lay out our plans carefully."

...

On the other side of the cove, Link said to Annie, "Bring her back with you, I'll chase and kill them!"

He couldn't end the battle by letting Andy escape. He would never be at peace if he didn't kill that cruel and perverted venomous snake.

As he was speaking, a notification flashed on the interface.

Mission First Step: Rescue Completed.

Omni Points Achieved: 20

Excellent! Add that up to his existing 14 Omni Points and he now had 34 points, and 63 Mana points left. That was more than enough!

At the same time, the second step in the mission was activated.

Mission: Pursue and Kill

Mission details: Attack and kill elite members of the Syndicate division.

Mission Rewards: 25 Omi Points

Current Progress: 22/32

That's good. If even the gaming system supported this action, then there was no reason for him to back off from it.

Annie felt a little anxious, but she knew that under these circumstances, just like when they were in Gladstone, there was no stopping Link from doing what he set out to do. She had no choice but to nod and agree, "Fine, but be careful. Leave some marks on your way, so General Anderson can quickly catch up with you."

"Understood." Link nodded.

He turned around to look at Lucy. This tenacious woman was still conscious. She did not make a sound and was staring wide-eyed at Link. She had resolutely not given in or begged for mercy. She even suffered through the pain without so much as a groan, but now that she saw her Lord and comrades right there in front of her, she turned into a little child who was reunited with her parents. Her stony countenance softened and her eyes brimmed with tears.

Link saw the lines of bruises and blood stains from lashings on Lucy's body, so he lifted his staff and pointed it at her and cast a spell.

"Elemental Cure."

A shroud of light covered Lucy's body, replenishing and curing the lost elements. When the spell had done its job, Link turned around and told Jacker, "Let's go, we'll kill those thieves!"

Chapter 61

Super Long-Distance Assault

The pathways in the Cove of Red Leaves were winding and narrow. The area after crossing the Riverbed of Silverfish was particularly difficult to maneuver around, with the dense forest blocking their every step.

But that was precisely what made Andy's trails especially clear.

The trampled undergrowth, splintered chopped wood from their hasty escape, and the unnatural position of bushes—these clues were telling and voluminous.

A fully armored Jacker cleared the path with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. Currently, there was no shred of fear in his heart.

With the assistance of Princess Annie, Link's destructive magic power, and his increasingly powerful abilities—coupled with his intricate equipment, these bolstered his courage.

Even the Syndicate was on the run from them.

In order to keep up with Jacker, Link cast a spell of Cat's Agility on both Gildern and himself. Gildern took up the role of a rear scout, as his marksman abilities were not made for close quarters combat.

They moved swiftly through the forest.

After ten minutes, Jacker was the first to reach the summit and the bird's eye view allowed him to spot the enemy easily. A team clad in brown leather armor, similar to that of the Syndicate bandits they defeated previously, were hastily on the run.

"My Lord, there's the enemy!" Jacker pointed ahead.

The enemy was at the foot of the mountain and there were roughly 15 of them. They were traveling at a relatively fast pace, albeit slower than Link due to the treacherous terrain of the mountains, which required them to constantly bash their way through

the overgrowth.

However, something was amiss with this group of bandits.

In theory, they should have been on the run due to fear of his magical prowess. As much as Andy was an impressive leader who instilled confidence in his men, they should have appeared hysterical and afraid.

And while this group of bandits was indeed traveling at a fast pace, they did not seem to be desperate. "Instead of being on the run, they seem to be on the retreat," Link clearly made a distinction between the two terms.

How could that be possible? Link placed himself in the shoes of the bandits. If his intricately planned ambush was easily overcome by the enemy, it would be a huge impact on his morale, even for him. He would definitely be frantically on the run.

Are you telling me these bandits are still clinging on to some form of hope? What if, they have other manpower already waiting in ambush for us? several possibilities flashed through Link's mind.

An ambush wouldn't be a problem for Link. His Aura Detection spell could easily pinpoint the hiding spots of his enemies.

However, something was still off. Link estimated the distance between the bandits and himself. He was currently occupying a higher ground of about 600 feet. It was at that moment Link had an epiphany.

Not only did he have the advantage of a higher ground, the group of bandits was also tightly clustered, his whistle would definitely be an unpleasant surprise for them!

"Since it might be a trap, let us commence our assault from here!" Link ordered, "Jacker, you continue on the pursuit, Gildern and I will catch up soon enough!"

"Roger!" Jacker had unflinching trust in Link and he sped towards the bandits without any second thoughts.

"Watch my back," Link said to Gildern.

Gildern nodded and unsheathed his dagger, standing on guard beside Link.

Link set his sights on the bandits and grabbed a handful of steel dust from his pocket. He felt a wave of magical energy surging into his Fire Crystal Staff and 0.2 seconds later, a metallic flaming tip formed at the top of his staff.

The metallic tip spun at a high speed and created a whistling sound that pierced through the silent forest, visible air ripples forming around it as magical energy continuously flowed. This phenomenon was caused when magical energy, elemental energy, and air interacted with one another.

Gildern looked at the magic with great respect, in awe of its terrifying power.

Link, on the other hand, was fully absorbed in his spellcasting, calculating the angle of assault in his mind.

In that instant, Link saw multiple images which converged at the position his enemies were currently at. He also saw many murky images which dictated their possible positions in the future.

Between him and those images was a long parabola which dictated his line of fire.

Link knew in his heart that this was the game interface giving support to players during spell casting, and not his own powers.

The game interface was useful not only in supplying missions that awarded Omni Points, but also in assisting him in spellcasting which greatly increased his attacking speed. And now, it was even helping him to make more precise attacks.

I wonder what else the system is capable of, Link thought expectantly.

The enemy was starting to fade away from his sight. Link slightly adjusted his spellcasting angle and without a second thought, fired his powerful magic attack!

Fwoosh~ The Whistle let out a high pitched sound and sped through the atmosphere, landing a hit on the bandits.

Six hundred feet was a really long distance for spellcasting. At the 300-foot mark, Link could barely control the attack, and by the 600 feet mark, Link could barely even feel the existence of the magic anymore. It was tough to ensure the magic didn't

disintegrate.

This was the difference between magic and weapons like guns, bows, and arrows. Magic was way more volatile and difficult to control!

In order to preserve the integrity of the magic, a Magician had to constantly focus and control his powers. The maximum distance of an attack was dependent on both the techniques of the Magician and the tenacity of the Magician's soul.

Naturally, the discussion of the soul falls into the realm of mystic studies, and its strength was difficult to quantify. Judging from Link's current power, maintaining a magical attack beyond 600 feet was already his limit.

It was impossible for him to control the trajectory of his attack at this distance.

The success of this long distance attack fully depended on his estimations before he lost control of his magic.

Link had full faith in the game system that the line of fire shown would allow him to successfully hit his targets.

The foot of the mountains.

...

Andy had no clue about his impending demise. After the black-robed Magician promised to offer help, the Magician on his tail was the least of his worries. Link was strong, but he too had a strong Magician on his side.

Currently, he simply had to follow the plan he made together with the black-robed Magician to lead Link into the trap they created.

When Link appeared at the mountain's summit, Andy was elated, the trap was set up midway down the mountains. As long as his enemies continued to be on their trail, they would fall victim to their elaborately planned trap.

Andy even slowed down his pace so that he could turn back to aid the black-robed Magician when the trap was triggered.

"No one has ever managed to make me look so bad in front of my men. When I get hold of you, you will be sorry you were ever born!" Andy browsed through the thousands of torture methods he knew by heart and swore to use them all on Link.

All of a sudden, a voice disrupted him from his thoughts.

"Hide behind the trees now! Immediately!"

The voice was anxious and rough, yet familiar—it was the black-robed Magician!

Andy had no idea what was happening but he trusted that the black-robed Magician would do him no harm. He threw himself behind a tree nearly a foot and a half wide in diameter.

At that moment, he heard a familiar yet terrifying whistling sound hissing into his ears.

A sharp sound echoed through the surroundings and boom! Andy felt a heat wave surge through the forest, violently disrupting the tranquility. This was followed by cries of pain and despair.

He emerged from his hiding spot and saw a revolting scene. At the place he was at, the remaining 14 members of the Syndicate lay lifelessly on the ground. Five of them died immediately on the spot while nine of them were injured. Among them, the five who were lucky enough to suffer mild injuries had a look consumed by fear and had already lost all morale.

The Syndicate bandits had lowered their guard and stuck together in a small group simply because they thought the enemy was far away.

Little did they know that a Whistle spell from Link almost wiped out their entire squad.

No, it did, in fact, wipe out the whole squad!

Andy's heart was beating at an insane rate, just when he wanted to remind the remaining members to split up and take cover, the familiar voice rang out again.

"Hide! The attack is here again!"

With lightning speed, Andy retreated behind the same tree.

The whistling sound struck again, followed by a deafening explosion and propelling rubble and dirt everywhere.

The only difference was the lack of screams. This time, there was complete silence.

Andy was devastated. The Night Blade Squad that he spent so much effort cultivating was now history.

In the end, they were all useless in the face of magic.

Is magic really such a fearsome power? Or is it the Magician that is terrifying? Have I incurred the wrath of someone I should never have? Andy began to question his decisions. His mind was in a whirl.

Link's magic had exceeded the expectations of Andy in every way. Under the fearsome assault, Andy's efforts were once again, all for naught.

Chapter 62

Psychological Warfare

On the Summit of the Hill.

...

Two more Whistles were unleashed, and the last remaining elite members of the Syndicate were killed. Then, Link noticed a flash of light on the interface, so he glanced at the new notification that just popped up.

Pursue and Kill Mission Completed.

Player rewarded with 25 Omni Points.

Next Mission Activated: Assassinate Andy.

Mission Details: Kill the leader of the thieves, Andy.

Missions Reward: 40 Omni Points.

Link accepted the mission immediately. He now had 59 Omni Points and 38 Mana points. Link knew that Andy might not be the last he would see of the Syndicate, but he'd be content with just being able to kill him alone after seeing what he'd done. One thing did make Link pause, though—the mission's high reward.

Andy's strength isn't that impressive, so why is the reward so high? Is he really worth 40 Omni Points? Is there anyone else helping him or is there more to this than what it seems?

The reward was ridiculously high. The mission of saving Gladstone only got him 100 Omni Points, so why was he being rewarded with 40 Omni Points just for killing a single Assassin? Link realized that he had to be more cautious in planning his next steps.

"Jacker, stop! Stand still!" shouted Link as he rushed forward. He was now more than

60 feet in front of them.

Jacker halted abruptly, raised his shield and went into a defensive stance. Link and Gildern quickly caught up to him and they regrouped.

"Keep on walking, but slowly. Beware of sneak attacks," said Link. As he spoke, Link used the spell Aura Detection on himself again to scan the surroundings in detail as he walked. He could only detect normal auras around him, nothing looked suspicious or out of place, and there was no sign of anyone lying in ambush.

Had I thought too much? Link doubted. But one could never be too careful, so Link told Jacker to carry on as slowly and vigilantly as possible.

Link thought he shouldn't worry too much because the only opponent left was Andy anyway. He was just a Level-3 thief, so even if he escaped from his field of vision Link could still use a tracking spell to hunt him down based on the aura and footprints he left. It would be just like how the Magician Holmes had used an Earth Hound to track Link down in Gladstone.

Soon after, the three reached halfway down the hill and Link's Aura Detection still detected nothing out of the ordinary. Oddly enough, that ominous sense that Link felt became even more palpable now.

"Stop. There's something wrong. Something smells fishy here." Link's niggling worry worsened, and deep furrows appeared between his brows.

Magicians naturally had excellent intuition and Link's soul was boosted by the God of Light, so he was even more sensitive than average.

From before, Link had sensed that the way Andy behaved was odd and unnatural. It seemed as if the gaming system was giving him hints. Now, the further downhill they were, that foreboding sense of danger was getting even stronger, as if an electric current ran through him making his hair stand on end.

Jacker and Gildern stood wordlessly beside Link, waiting for his orders. The two were just normal mercenaries, and in a special battle like this where they faced such a powerful opponent as the Syndicate, they were as blind as a mole and couldn't see through the situation at all. All they knew was that they must obey Link's orders.

"Why is Andy just hiding behind the tree there and doing nothing? Has he been scared

out of his wits?" asked Jacker.

When Link attacked Andy with his spells earlier, it seemed as if someone had warned him of the attack and told him to hide. And ever since then he had stayed behind the tree, not making any attempt to escape or attack them.

But Link had been in his spellcasting state of mind at that time, so he failed to take any notice of this peculiarity. Now that Jacker pointed it out, Link's intuition flared up again. It dawned on him how odd Andy's reactions had been.

He was oblivious to my attack and I should've been able to defeat him in that one strike, but he dodged it at the very last moment. If he had noticed my attack then, then he should've warned his underlings to scatter, but he didn't do that. He swerved suddenly, seemingly, without even understanding why or what he was evading...No, someone else must've warned him! The idea occurred to Link as he thought. But who could've warned him? Link used Aura Detection to scan left and right, trying to sniff out any hidden enemy in the forest, but as usual, he detected nothing.

This secret accomplice must have very high camouflaging skills. He could even see through my attacks and alert Andy to it. He must be a Magician. Which means that right now, a powerful Magician is hiding in this forest! This much Link was sure.

It was only when Link had reached this conclusion that all the odd puzzle pieces in the present situation began to fall into place.

Because Andy had an accomplice who was a powerful Magician, it was no wonder that the thieves had regained their confidence to fight back after they had fled from Link. It was also no wonder that Andy could escape from Link's attacks. And because the accomplice was a powerful Magician, he had no trouble remaining invisible under Link's searching eyes.

But where could the Magician be hiding? There were still some missing puzzle pieces that Link couldn't identify, but he remained level-headed enough to be able to think clearly.

This Magician must be of a much higher level than me, or at least his concealment skills are much better than mine. But he probably isn't superior to me in battles, though. Otherwise, he wouldn't be hiding from me...

Just as he was having these thoughts, he noticed some changes in the surroundings. It

came from behind a tree at the base of the hill.

It was Andy, leaping and bolting out from his hiding spot.

"You damned Flamingos, I remember all of you! Just you wait, one day I'll make you wish you were dead!" shouted Andy in a heated rage.

There was pure hatred and vengeance in his voice, and the anger contorted his face so much that it looked grotesque. He looked exactly like a demon from hell.

"My Lord, should we go after him?" whispered Jacker, considerably shaken by the sight.

In his experience as a mercenary, psychopathic and perverted devils like Andy were the type of opponent he feared the most. These people were typically hell-bent on destruction and they didn't care if it meant that they would be killed in the process, much less if it would snuff out the lives of others.

Every time he was faced with this type of opponent, he would either run away from them as far as he could or just kill them swiftly and be done with it.

"My Lord, he's getting away!" urged Gildern. He had the same thoughts as Jacker.

The two mercenaries had been dazed by Andy's trick and were subconsciously falling into his traps. If Link's mind hadn't been strong enough, they would all fall into Andy's trap.

This was the reason why a war general's most important attributes when leading the soldiers into battle were his mental strength and clarity. Even though Link had never experienced real war before, the same pLinkiple still applied here.

"No need to rush, he won't be able to escape far," said Link, shaking his head. Luckily, Link could always maintain a clear focus and was not easily affected or duped by Andy's tricks.

Andy must've been trying to taunt us into following him. He's likely going to lead us into the traps set by the Magician... Yes, we had been following him all along, and that's just what he and his accomplice wanted. We must not fall into their traps!

Link began to piece together the hidden Magician's schemes now. Though he was

taken aback by the sudden shift of events, he managed to make his own plans too.

"Chase him, but don't follow his exact route. We'll make our own path," ordered Link.

"Yes, my Lord!" cried Jacker.

Jacker nodded and turned away from the path used by the Syndicate's thieves. Then, using the steel armor on his body as protection, he pushed down the shrubs and overgrowths of the forest to carve out a new path. Link and Gildern followed behind him, moving at a speed only slightly slower than before. They marched on without incident or attacks, rapidly shrinking the distance between themselves and Andy.

In the middle of the hill forest, the black-robed Magician gripped the wand in his hand and creased his brows. He was frustrated that they had not been lured by his bait. His carefully set plans had been ruined.

"He's not an easy opponent to defeat. This is the Magician who killed Holmes in Gladstone, after all. I guess I'd have to exert some effort into this then!" He breathed in deeply and his eyes were focused. He had now entered the calm state of spellcasting.

Chapter 63

A Trick up the Sleeve

Battles between Magicians differ slightly from that with other classes.

The major difference, being high-level spells, would rarely be used in a one-on-one Magician duel.

The reason was simple. The higher the spell level, the more complex its spell structure. Magicians would then have to spend longer time on both constructing the magic and gathering enough energy to release the attack, inevitably increasing the time needed to cast spells.

This was almost an iron-clad rule.

A Magician had to be extremely focused during spellcasting and would be vulnerable to any incoming attacks. In most cases, Level-1 Spells would be more than sufficient to defeat the opponent, which was why Magicians rarely used high-level spells when they were not under protection.

The most commonly used spells in duels are Level-0 and Level-1 Spells, Level-2 Spells would also occasionally be used either for ambush attacks or when a lead had already been secured.

Currently, the black-robed Magician was hiding in the undergrowth with a Level-3 Invisibility Spell cast over himself.

This Invisibility spell was extremely strong, blending the user completely into the environment and even erasing most of the user's Innate Aura. Naturally, this was not something detectable by Link's Level-0 Aura Detection Spell.

Without a doubt, he had gotten the pre-emptive strike advantage in this duel.

Being able to land the first hit was a huge advantage, in fact, it was usually the deciding factor in a duel. This advantage often gave Magicians a chance to release a high-level spell which would otherwise be difficult to pull off!

This duel might be over in just one hit!

In order to hide his trails, the black-robed Magician chose a hiding spot around 240 feet away from Link. This distance had already exceeded his spellcasting range.

He also took a huge risk by not casting a high-level defensive spell on himself in order to enhance the effectiveness of the Invisibility spell. The defensive spell would have created a concentrated magic aura around him making him easily noticeable, rendering the Invisibility spell useless.

The strongest defense was usually not one which protects you from a powerful attack, but one which conceals you from your opponent. With this knowledge, the black-robed Magician chose the Invisibility spell over the defensive spell without any hesitation.

And that decision had now bore fruit by providing him a chance to strike first using a high-level spell.

"Should I use a defensive spell or an attacking spell first?" The black-robed Magician weighed the pros and cons of the two choices. His strongest defensive spell was a Level-3 Mid-Level Guarding Barrier with a casting time of 2.5 seconds, which could effectively protect him from a Level-3 magic attack.

As he had the pre-emptive strike advantage, he should have been able to successfully cast the spell. However, the Mid-Level Guarding Barrier spell could only defend against elemental attacks and was not effective against physical ones. Based on his previous observations, the long distance attack his opponent released had a strong piercing effect; his Guarding Barrier might not be strong enough to withstand the impact.

His next defensive spell was the Magician's Armor, a Level-2 spell. This spell performs well in the face of both physical and magical attacks. However, his opponent was using a Level-1 spell enchanted with Supreme Magic Skills, which might easily break through his Level-2 defensive spell. He did not harbor much hope for this too.

His opponent's spellcasting speed was way too fast—Magician's Armor would disintegrate in an instant if he focused on offense. Furthermore, his attacks would most surely be blocked by the loyal Warrior at his side.

The result would be his life in exchange for that of his opponent's follower. It was not a worthwhile exchange.

It seems like offensive spells are the way to go! the black-robed Magician weighed his options and came to a conclusion.

More problems arose.

His opponent was way too far for him to assault with pure elemental spells. Throwing-type spells would also be blocked by the shield Warrior.

If only I was closer to them, I could have cast my Level-3 Chain Lightning and inflict paralysis on them! The black-robed Magician was slightly disheartened.

After much thought, the black-robed Magician chose to use the highest leveled summoning spell in his archive. Magical powers surged into his staff, the sapphire at the tip of the staff glimmered ever so slightly, forming runic magic circles in the atmosphere. When the fourth magic circle appeared, the black-robed Magician stopped the transfer of magical energy.

He pointed at the ground and the four magic circles each released a beam of runic symbols which converged onto the ground, enchanting it with magical powers.

In an instant, the ground started to tremble, forming a rolling, growling ball of mud. It grew exponentially in size, congealing more rubble and mud together until it reached 12-foot-high. This ball of dirt then began to transform.

Limbs sprouted out of its unimpressive body, then clear muscular groups began to form. Before long, it became a 12-foot-high Golem with crystallized rubble formed at its surface. This was especially so at the limbs, where more rubble was concentrated to give support. It looked almost as if it were wearing a crystal armor.

Summoning Magic: Crystal Golem

Crystal Golem

Level-4 Spell

Mana Cost:280

Effect: Summons an extremely strong earth elemental golem. The effect lasts for 30 minutes or till destroyed

(Note: It's extremely strong!)

This was a strong Level-4 spell, also the only one known by the black-robed Magician. He heaved a sigh of relief after using the spell.

The magical construct of this spell was very complex, and also consumed a lot of Mana. He was drained of more than half his Mana from this one spell, not to mention that it took him 4 seconds to complete the spellcasting.

The appearance of this Crystal Golem in a tranquil forest with the Magic Disturbance of a Level-4 spell was bound to be noticed.

In fact, from the time the black-robed Magician started casting the spell, Link had already felt something was amiss.

But when he finally pinpointed the position of his enemy, the golem was already fully formed.

Boom! Boom! Boom! A 12-foot-high Crystal Golem sauntered towards them. It destroyed everything in its way, from trees the size of a man's limb to trees with more than one foot in diameter, in a single hit.

Such destructive force was simply unstoppable! It might be possible for a Level-5 Warrior or higher, but not for Link and his comrades. Even Jacker, the strongest of them all, would not be able to stop this monstrosity.

Gildern fired an arrow at the golem.

Tick. The metallic arrow barely grazed the surface of the Golem. A few pieces of crystal shattered while the golem sauntered on.

A pale Jacker immediately jumped in front of Link in an attempt to protect him. "My Lord, I'll deal with this, please leave now!" He was prepared to fight to his death.

Link kept silent and stayed put.

He recognized this spell.

Crystal Golem, a Level-4 spell. From what he saw, it should only have been a normal version of the spell without any enchantment effects from Supreme Magic Skills. Of

course, this spell was still difficult to deal with.

If he had used up his 59 Omni Points previously, the three of them would no doubt be eliminated by this spell. The gears in his mind spun wildly, looking for a solution.

The best counter-magic to summoning magic would be dispelling magic.

However, the magic structure of a Level-4 spell was extremely stable. Without a Level-4 or higher dispel spell, it would not be effective. On the other hand, even if Link bought a Level-4 dispel spell with his Omni Points, he would not have enough Mana to cast the spell. Link therefore dismissed this idea almost immediately.

Then there was only one other option left. Stall the summoned and kill the summoner.

Link thought of a plan. "Purchase Support Magic: Might of a Giant!"

Might of a Giant

Level-3 Spell

Mana Cost: 60

Effect: Greatly increases the strength of the receiver. Increases strength by 200%. Effect lasts ten minutes.

Even though this was a Level-3 spell, its Mana cost was relatively low at 60 Mana due to its supporting nature. Link's mana was now at 35 points. Purchasing a Level-3 spell would leave him with 29 Omni Points. He spent the rest of the Omni Points on increasing his Maximum Mana without hesitation.

As a result, his Mana became 64 points, just enough for one casting of Might of a Giant

His staff glowed with a bloody red aura. The sticky consistency of the aura was akin to blood and was transferred into Jacker's body with graceful fluidity. Under the effect of the spell, Jacker's muscles instantaneously increased in size, and his body glowed with a metallic golden shine. His muscles became even more defined and looked on the verge of tearing.

One look at Jacker would remind someone of the Legendary Titan of Greek mythology. "ARRGGHHH!!!!" Jacker felt power surging through his body and

uncontrollably let out a war cry which reverberated through the mountains.

The spell took two seconds to cast. Jacker's eyes shone with the bloody redness of the magic aura and he felt a destructive force churning in his body. It felt as though he could shatter anything into smithereens.

At that moment, the Crystal Golem threw a punch at Link and his comrades.

This punch was devastating. Before the hit even landed, the blow had already flattened the overgrowth around the area.

ARRGH! Jacker raised his shield in defense.

Jacker has already attained the peak of Level-3 Combat Aura and was naturally born with the gift of strength. Being enchanted by magic now effectively tripled his original strength. In theory, he should have the power of a Level-5 Warrior.

Crash! A low rumble echoed, the shield and the Golem's giant fist came into contact and both of them stopped in their tracks. Everyone was holding their breaths. It was a stalemate!

Jacker gritted his teeth. He was almost at his limit. His body trembled slightly and dug his heels deep into the mud. This was Link's chance.

Chapter 64

A Walking Lump of Meat?

Jacker gritted his teeth as he was hit with each explosive blow from the Crystal Golem, straining to keep himself from collapsing.

With each attack, his bones rattled, his inner organs churned as if he were riding on a tsunami, his chest pounded violently, and his throat was filled with the metallic taste of blood.

He was at death's doorstep. He knew that he would not be able to last much longer. Another five minutes? Six? He wasn't sure.

But apart from the foreboding sense of imminent death, another peculiar feeling emerged in Jacker's mind under the weight of those horrendous attacks.

Jacker felt as if each of the Crystal Golem's attack was like the strike of a hammer and his body was like a piece of hot iron being forged and wrought by the hammer. As thrashing after thrashing hammered down on him, he felt excruciating pain, but at the same time, he felt as if the attacks were pounding the impurities out of his body, forging him into a stronger Warrior.

Well, look at me. I'm holding out against a giant of an opponent. How proud would my friends be of me if they saw me now?

Another heavy strike from the Crystal Giant and blood surged up through Jacker's throat, staining his teeth red with fresh blood. Still, there was not a shred of fear in his mind, only courage that grew bolder and bolder.

To be able to fight against an opponent worthy of the legends – this was exactly the kind of battle he'd always wished for!

On the other side, Link had managed to escape to a spot where he would be safe from the Crystal Golem's attack. His gaze swept across the battlefield.

In a few seconds, he spotted his two targets – one was the Magician in a black robe

whose face was covered and was holding a Mithril wand with a blue gemstone on its tip, and the second was Andy who was beaming with regained confidence now that he had a Crystal Golem on his side.

Once his targets were identified, Link stopped to quickly assess the whole situation.

Right now, he had 4 Mana points, which was only sufficient for one Whistle or four Glass Orbs. As a Level-3 Assassin, Andy possessed dangerous speed, so if he ever got near Link, Gildern would not be able to block him—in one second Link would be finished!

At the same time, there was another opponent that he'd have to face – the Magician. He had the capability to summon the Level-4 Crystal Golem, so he must be at least a Level-4 Magician. What was worrying was the fact that his magic aura was still more intense than Link's present aura, even after summoning a Level-4 spell. That meant that he could cast much more powerful spells than Link in his current condition.

Under these circumstances, it seemed impossible for Link to defeat the Magician!

Both of them were dangerous enemies and the situation had now become life-threatening to Link. From the way things stood, it seemed that Link had fallen into a bottomless pit of defeat. Still, Link had no intention to give up yet. He would give it his best shot and fight to his last breath!

That was how he excelled in the game in his previous life. He had even achieved the miraculous feat of single-handedly defeating the Demi-God Lord of the Deep, Nozama, all thanks to his unrelenting determination.

And that was how he intended to face the present battle. It was just in his nature to never give up – always had been, and always will be.

Link's eyes swept the whole scene of the battle and quickly he spotted a potential opening for an attack.

Andy had nimble and agile limbs, so he could easily hide behind the tree trunks to shield himself. He was gradually closing in on them at 100 feet. Gildern had fired a few arrows at him, but he dodged them with seemingly no effort at all.

The black-robed Magician was not so brash, though. He made no moves or attacks. Instead, he kept hiding behind a tree trunk more than 200 feet away, observing the

situation now and again, obviously trying to be out of range of Link's spells.

Although he would be safe from Link's spells at that distance, at the same time it meant his spells won't reach Link either. In fact, the Magician had not been attacking at all, he was obviously waiting for Andy to get near to Link before making his move.

And that was the chance that Link spotted. The Magician would not begin his attacks yet, but if he could kill Andy, then he would complete the mission of killing the leader of the thieves and receive 40 Omni Points. That would boost his chance of defeating the black-robed Magician.

"Back me up. We'll kill Andy!" muttered Link in an urgent voice.

Gildern nodded then inhaled deeply. He reached for three arrows in the quiver then nocked all of them at once on his bow. Gildern knew this was a moment of life and death, so he focused all his energy and concentration on this one attack.

By this time, Andy was already 60 feet away, close enough that Link could plainly see those pair eyes that were brimming with bloodthirst.

Coincidentally, Andy was looking this way too, and the two locked eyes.

It was the first time Andy had seen Link at such a close distance, and it made him stop in his tracks momentarily. He had expected to see a young Magician pale-faced with fear and shaken to his core. But what he saw instead was a dark pair of eyes, unfaltering and chillingly calm.

The word young didn't seem to suit the owner of those eyes, though he didn't seem old either. The Magician couldn't be more than 16 or 17 years old, his body looked gaunt and weak, and his arms couldn't be any thicker than a toothpick. The only thing that stood out about him was his expressions, or rather his lack thereof. His face did not betray any kind of emotion. Even when Andy was staring into his eyes, he couldn't detect a trace of feeling there at all.

Is this really the Magician who killed all my Night Blade members? He looked so weak that a single breeze could carry him off. I can easily finish him off with a single stab of my dagger. But why is he not afraid? Andy had seen countless people, but Link was unlike any other he had met so far.

In the short instance that Andy was lost in his thoughts, Gildern grabbed the

opportunity and raised the three arrows and shot it towards Andy. At the same time, Link also shot a glass orb at him.

A gust of wind roused Andy back to his senses; he was now faced with arrows shooting towards his eyes. But with lightning speed, he raised his dagger. Clang! With the dagger in his left hand, he easily deflected the arrows and sent them flying in another direction, and with the dagger in his right hand, he stabbed at Link's glass orb.

Bang! The orb swiftly moved forward, but all the same, Andy had managed to stab it with his dagger because his reaction was incredibly fast!

This was what high-level Assassins were capable of. Their biggest strength was their speed, and each movement they made in battles was with purpose. They reacted to each attack without having to think because they had gone through so much training; it had become their second nature.

No matter how random and unpredictable Link's Glass Orbs' movements were, their speed could never exceed 100 feet per second. To common folks, this speed was unimaginably fast, but it fell short when faced with a high-level Assassin like Andy.

After successfully thwarting the attacks, Andy bent his body and sprung towards a tree and hid behind it, as nimbly as a fox.

He was now only 50 feet away from Link.

Right now, Jacker was struggling to block the Crystal Golem's attacks with all his might, and it seemed that he wouldn't last any longer. Link had only 4 Mana points left. Gildern's shooting skills weren't bad, but he was only a Level-2 mercenary—his reaction speed and attacking speed was no match for Andy.

While on the other side, Andy was armed with anti-magic armor and anti-magic daggers, so Glass Orbs couldn't hurt him much at all. In addition, somewhere further away in the forest lurked a powerful master Magician waiting for the right moment to attack.

At that point, even Link was beginning to think that they had a slim chance of killing Andy.

Then Andy appeared from behind the tree and in a flash, disappeared behind another tree again. He was now only 30 feet away from them.

"Magician, it's time for you to die!" said the Assassin, and Link could clearly hear his maniacal voice ringing through the forest.

The black-robed Magician told him that the young Magician had almost used up all his Mana and that at most, he could only cast two spells. A Magician without his spells, in Andy's eyes, was nothing more than a walking lump of meat!

Chapter 65

Turning the Tables in A Desperate Situation!

What exactly was a bandit? And what constituted an Assassin?

There was only a fine line between the two professions. Both prided themselves on being agile and having delicate movements. The only difference was their way of earning their keep. While the former used his abilities to rob people of their riches, the latter specialized in killing people for the bounty on their heads.

The Syndicate, in essence, was an amalgamation of both—an organization of bandits that robbed people of their lives! And at the top of these immoral acts, sat Andy.

Andy crept behind a tree roughly 30 feet away from Link, gently caressing the blade of his anti-magic dagger. The Magician behind the tree, Link, was young, but powerful—there was no doubt that he was a genius. The thought of claiming the life of such a talented Magician excited him.

Andy listened intently to Link's breathing patterns. Link was breathing at a fast pace, faster than most combatants. However, what set him apart from a normal human was the stability of his breathing. Even during times like this, the pace of his breathing didn't change.

Isn't this guy shocked that I just blocked his attack? Andy was slightly disappointed, he would much rather fight an opponent who had given up all hope, rather than one who was calm and collected. It brought him joy to see his opponent suffer.

In the face of such calmness, Andy began to hesitate. How can he be so unflinching? Could it be that he has a trump card that I do not know of? Should I unveil all my powers now?

Despite having the backing of a Magician, the trauma from his previous encounter with Link's unimaginably powerful magic had not yet dissipated.

Andy knew that the only that could bring him out from the shadows of his failures was the life of the Magician opposite him right now. But would he be successful?

Time was passing: one second, two seconds, three...

The voice of the black-robed Magician rang in his head, "What are you waiting for! The opponent has already called for backup; the time is tight!"

While Andy was clueless about Princess Annie's background, the black-robed Magician was fully aware. He was also aware that the army of River Cove Town was rushing to this location under the command of a strong Level-4 Knight. He had no confidence in securing victory against his opponent.

If the knight managed to establish contact with Link, they would have no chance of winning.

The voice of the black-robed Magician woke Andy up from his thoughts. He listened intently to Link's breathing and discerned his exact location. A second later, Andy was on the move!

Holding his dagger, he emerged from behind the tree with lightning speed and threw the anti-magic dagger towards the location he marked out.

He did not intend to use this attack to inflict any form of damage, but as a decoy to distract his opponent's spellcasting!

He then threw the second dagger directly at Link. From the trajectory, it would pierce Link through the abdomen. If Link could not retaliate in time, he would be gravely injured, if not, dead!

Andy then sprung out from his hiding place and activated his Battle Skill: Dance of Slaughter!

Dance of Slaughter

Level-3 Battle Skill

Effect: Releases a huge amount of Combat Aura allowing the user to move swiftly and elegantly towards the target, much like a graceful dance. The movements are so fast the target will see multiple images.

(Note: Be careful, this is the prelude to an assassination. Using this skill will allow the user to cover 30 feet in less than half a second!)

This Battle Skill was specifically used to deal with opponents who were sluggish and physically weak. More often than not, it ensured not only the safety of the Assassin but also the death of the target!

At the same time, Link sensed something was amiss. He knew that the deciding factor of this match lied in this final second. He currently had 3.2 Mana points after the short recovery period. These Mana points could be used to fire three glass orbs and to cast The Magician's Hand once.

His greatest threat at this moment was the anti-magic dagger.

Link made his decision in a split second. He released The Magician's Hand!

Even though the dagger had anti-magic properties, it could only dispel spells that were elemental in nature, but not spells that were mystic in nature. Although The Magician's Hand was a weak spell, it was purely mana in nature and would thus be effective.

The Magician's Hand successfully blocked the airborne dagger and greatly reduced its speed.

But in the end, the Magician's Hand was still weak. In the face of the power of a Level-3 Assassin, the dagger would still retain some of its power.

However, the weakening of the dagger was enough. At the moment the dagger saw a decrease in speed, Gildern lunged forward, using his steel arrow as a sword.

Clang! The dagger was knocked off its trajectory and failed to do any damage to Link.

Link's attention, on the other hand, was already long drawn away from the dagger. Even if Gildern had not knocked the dagger off its trajectory, he was prepared to take the hit. Based on the angle of the dagger and its speed after the interference of the Magician's Hand, Link had deemed the injury to be non-lethal. However, if Andy, a professional killer, managed to come into close proximity, he would definitely be dead!

Luckily, the situation was a lot more positive.

Andy had already managed to cover 18 feet by now—time was running out. Link immediately tapped the ground with his Fire Crystal Staff and in 0.04 seconds, a glass orb was released!

This had exceeded his maximum spellcasting speed!

But how?

The Fire Crystal Staff possessed the ability to increase spellcasting speed, especially when casting fire elemental magic. This was because the fire crystal at the tip of the staff contained a certain fire element, thereby reducing the time needed to gather energy.

The glass orb shot into the atmosphere, constantly changing its trajectory based on Andy's position.

Andy was swiftly maneuvering in different directions due to the effects of his activated skill. His position changed every single moment and his speed was so fast multiple images were formed. In Gildern's eyes, it was impossible to determine which was the real one.

If he could not determine the exact position of his opponent, how was he going to land an attack?

The opponent was way too strong. Gildern was unable to react fast enough to counter his attack. He could only watch as Andy maliciously advanced towards them with breakneck speed!

However, Link was special. In his eyes, there were no multiple images and all was crystal clear. His reaction time was way faster than a normal human, and no matter how Andy tried to deceive him with multiple images, his line of vision was always fixated on the real one!

The Glass Orb drew an elegant S-shaped trajectory in the air as it completely ignored the dazzling moves put out by Andy. It hit Andy right in the face!

This completely unexpected attack knocked Andy off his feet. He did not expect his plan to be foiled. By the time he regained his focus, it was too late to block the incoming attack with his anti-magic dagger!

This was how the situation unfolded from a third-person perspective.

After Andy rushed out from his hiding spot, he activated his skill and was enveloped in a glow of light. He dashed towards Link but before he could take the fourth step, he

was hit in the face by Link's attack!

Boom! The glass marble exploded with a low rumble.

The residual flames from the explosion were put out by Andy's anti-magic leather armor and his own Battle Aura. However, the impact of the explosion penetrated through the anti-magic mask and hit Andy in the face with full force.

While the impact was cushioned by the anti-magic mask, it was significant. The force of the explosion was comparable to that of a bodybuilder throwing out his fist with full force. This was enough to interrupt Andy's Battle Skill and brought him to a halt.

"Success!"

Link heaved a sigh of relief. His opponent was traveling at an insanely fast speed. If he had made any mistakes, the result of this battle would have turned out differently. This was definitely the most harrowing battle ever since he descended into Firuman!

Link gave Andy no chance to recollect himself, firing a second glass marble into his face yet again.

Boom! Andy was still reeling in shock from the previous attack and failed to dodge in time. He took the full force of the second attack.

He was completely in a daze.

Link still had one Mana point remaining, and could only release one more glass orb. It was then Link saw the black-robed magician running in their direction, intending to rescue Andy.

However, the black-robed Magician was still 240 feet away, a distance that was further than his spellcasting range. Link was struck by an idea and decided to release the last glass orb in his direction.

The maximum range of Glass Orb was 180 feet after being enchanted with Supreme Magic Skill. This range was almost the limit of pure elemental spells below the Legendary rank.

There was a limit to the casting range of pure elemental magic. Usually, the limit was at 240 feet, any further, elements would start to disintegrate due to the weakening of

focus and turbulence in the atmosphere. This was an ironclad rule, unaffected by the willpower of Magicians.

This was the black-robed Magician's first encounter with Glass Orb. He did not expect the attack to have such a long range. He was not worried when he first witnessed a dull, light blue marble fired in his direction. However, when the marble exceeded the normal spellcasting range of 90 feet and showed no signs of disintegration, he was taken aback and immediately released a defensive spell in response.

His staff was enveloped in a ball of light and a Level-1 spell was instantaneously cast. It was a low-level Guarding Barrier that performed exceptionally well in terms of magic defense.

Little did he know that this delay had far greater implications.

It was at this moment Gildern took action!

A distance of fewer than 30 feet, coupled with a stationary target was child's play for Gildern's archery skills.

A split second was all it took. Andy was dead!

Chapter 66

Dark Elf?

Bang! Bang! Bang! Gildern quickly fired three successive arrows. The steel arrows shot through the air, one heading towards Andy's heart, one towards the eyes and the last one towards the belly. And they all hit smack-dab on the target!

Andy's leather armor might have had anti-magic properties, but against Gildern's carved steel arrows shot from his new strong bow, it was downright futile!

The three arrows went straight through Andy's body. He died before he had time to utter a cry.

Then, a notification popped up on the interface, but Link didn't bother to check its details, he only cared for the Omni Points. Once he verified that he now had 40 more Omni Points, he spent 20 points to increase his Maximum Mana limit without delay.

Now his Maximum Mana increased to 148 points, and his Mana was at 21 points – enough to shoot off his Whistles.

With Andy dead, Link focused all his attention on the black-robed Magician who was 200 feet away.

The Fire Crystal staff in his hand lit up, and in 0.2 seconds, a Whistle screeched through the air, heading quickly towards the black-robed Magician.

The Magician had just been dealing with the previous attack of Glass Orbs, he never expected that things would change so drastically in less than a second. He was dazed, but his reactions remained quick. With lightning footsteps, he turned and hid behind a tree trunk.

He wouldn't be able to hide from Link's Whistle behind the tree, but at least it would protect him from the arrows, so he could concentrate on spellcasting without worrying about the archer.

Soon after taking cover behind the tree, he could hear the shrilling sound that Whistle

made rushing towards him. The moment it broke through his Guarding Barrier, he waved the wand in front of him and cast a spell.

"Frost Shield!"

Instantly a triangular shield with an area of about 10 square feet appeared in front of him. The shield was unlike the Ice Shield used in Gladstone—it had a bigger surface area, it was more stable, and the spellcasting speed was much faster too, being fully formed within 0.3 seconds.

This was an Ice Shield that had been modified with Supreme Magical Skills.

Clang! The instant the Frost Shield took form, there was an impact that left a white point on it. And from that white point cracks emerged and spread throughout the shield like cobwebs. It looked like the shield was going to collapse.

But there was another Whistle coming for the Magician from behind!

The high-speed rotating spike of death had gone around the forest and reached behind the Magician, heading straight towards his heart!

The black-robed Magician had the fright of his life. He had not expected the young Magician's spellcasting to be as quick and relentless as a hurricane. It was only now that he felt he'd gotten a real taste of Link's true power, and he couldn't deny the pressure it exerted on him.

It's no surprise that he could defeat Holmes with a low-level spell like Vector Throw. Holmes must've underestimated this young Magician, and to his cost!

Holmes' defeat illustrated the fact that a Magician's skills in battle and his knowledge in spells were two different things. A Magicians' source of power might spring from their knowledge in the facts and theories of magic, but at the same time, these fixed laws and theories did not always translate well into battle skills and could in no way substitute battle experience!

In other words, Magicians were primarily scholars and, secondarily, warriors in battles.

When two Magicians battle, what truly mattered were the distance and the speed at which they could cast their spells. The rest – whether it's the level of their spells or

the strength of their Mana – were merely figures that looked good on paper, but in fact, meant nothing on battlefields.

Even if you had knowledge of higher-level spells or could cast more powerful spells than the opponent, if you were too late or too slow in using them, then all of it would just be in vain!

And that was why those Magicians who wanted to be stronger in battles would tirelessly strive for additional and more advanced Supreme Magical Skills, especially those that improved their spellcasting speed and spellcasting distance.

But as proven now, the black-robed Magician had not been developing these aspects of his skills as much as he should, or at least, not enough that he could match Link's distant and fast spellcasting.

In fact, this Level-4 Magician had been cornered and pressured into defensive mode by Link's Whistle.

When the Whistle headed towards him, he had no time to cast an offensive spell, all he could do was cast a defensive spell.

Buzz! In an instant, a transparent crystal-like bubble appeared around the Magician's body.

Physical Defensive Spell: Omnidirectional Vector Shield!

Level-1 Spell

Effects: Creates a repulsive force field that deflects any object that tries to break through the shield. The higher the speed of the penetrating object, the bigger the force of its repulsion.

Link's Whistle crashed into the shield as soon as it appeared and it discernibly slowed down the moment it entered the force field. In half a second, when it was a foot away from the Magician, its 600 feet per second speed had slowed down drastically almost to a halt.

Finally, it stopped at about four inches away from the Magician's body. He could clearly see that on the surface of the rotating metal spike, there were numerous runes continuously flashing red light, looking very unstable.

From a glance, the black-robed Magician knew that it was a complicated and high-level spell that would attack in two stages – first would be a physical impact, and the second would be an explosion!

"Damn it!" cursed the Magician. He knew that an explosive power would be released, and not only would he have to deal with the flames, but he would have to face the metal pieces that would be sent flying in all directions by the explosion. He knew that his shield was undoubtedly insufficient in blocking the shrapnel.

Then, the black-robed Magician finally showed the true capabilities of a Level-4 Magician – in no time at all, he had instantaneously cast the Level-0 Basic Guarding Barrier around his body. It was only a Level-0 spell, so he could cast it quickly. In fact, he didn't just cast the spell once, but in that short period of time, he managed to cast five basic Guarding Barrier around his body, right at the moment before the Whistle exploded.

Bang! Shattered metal pieces were scattered in all directions, most of them were deflected by the shield, but some managed to penetrate the shield and hit the Magician's body. Tongues of flame from the explosion spewed in all directions too, but the Magician was protected partly by the Guarding Barrier and partly by his robe. Nonetheless, a small part of the fire did reach the Magician's body.

A groan of pain escaped the Magician's mouth before he could stop it. He had to make a hasty decision then. Instantly, a ring on his finger flashed up and the Magician's body was engulfed by a burst of blinding white light. 0.1 second later, the Magician had disappeared into thin air, and reappeared again hundreds of yards away!

He had used a short-distance teleportation spell – Burst!

Bang! Another Whistle had exploded exactly where he had been moments ago. If he had escaped just seconds later, he would've been a fresh corpse by now.

Once he was about 300 feet away from them, the black-robed Magician's wand lit up again and 1.8 seconds later, an enormous magical creature began to materialize – Ashen Hawk.

Ashen Hawk

Level-3 Spell

Effects: The colossal hawk will transport the spellcaster at the speed of a wild swan.

Grey billowing smoke streamed out from the blue gemstone at the tip of the black-robed Magician's Mithril wand. Then the smoke coalesced into dust, grass, sticks, and other light objects to form a giant hawk. The black-robed Magician then mounted onto its back. The giant hawk flapped its wings and flew up into the sky.

To evade from Link's Whistles, the hawk flew in sporadic paths, fluctuating up and down, then zig-zagging from left to right. Only when it had flown more than a thousand feet away, which meant they were safely out of Link's attacking range, did it pick up speed and soared away into the distance.

The black-robed Magician had gotten away!

There was no way of chasing the Magician now, so all Link could do was to stare at the Magician flying away on his giant bird.

The moment the black-robed Magician escaped, the Crystal Golem gave out and stopped its attacks abruptly. Its structure didn't collapse but it just stood there motionless instead.

Jacker immediately backed away from the giant and heaved a huge sigh. Beads of sweat streamed down his forehead as if he had been standing in the rain. Heaven knew how harrowing the battle had been to Jacker and how much of a close shave it had been with death for him.

Still, it wasn't a total loss. He felt as though the fierce battle had unshackled his potential and freed him from his own doubts which had been holding him back. He was confident now that with just a little bit more training he would surely be able to reach Level-4.

Link sighed with relief too. He stared at the diminishing figure in the sky that was the Magician.

"We've been tricked by a Dark Elf!" said Link with a bitter laugh.

When the metal shell of Link's Whistle pierced the Magician's body after it exploded, Link noticed that the blood that spilled out was dark blue with a purplish tinge – that was an irrefutable characteristic of the Dark Elves' blood.

It's little wonder that the strange incident in the East Cove Magic Academy happened half a year after the tragedy of the Change of the Bloody Moon when there were Dark Elves lurking around causing mischiefs.

Finally, Link went back to the interface and checked the latest notification. He was immediately taken aback by the contents of the newly activated mission.

Mission Activated: Search for Clues.

Mission Details: Locate the members of the Syndicate division and from there retrieve more information about the Dark Elf Magician.

Mission Rewards: 20 Omni Points.

What is the Dark Elf Magician up to now? Link was apprehensive because from what he learned of the nature of the game and in lights of recent events, he knew that this Dark Elf Magician must not be taken lightly.

Never mind, I'm too exhausted to think of anything now. I'll just wait for General Anderson to arrive and we'll decide what to do next then.

Chapter 67

The Final Opponent

Red Leaves Cove

...

"Gildern, pack our spoils of war and we'll set off," Link commanded.

Link usually left the physical labor to his followers. Jacker was injured from the previous fight while Gildern remained unscathed. The work naturally fell into the hands of Gildern, who hastily loaded the weapons and armor they looted from the bandits of the Syndicate.

After casting an Elemental Healing Magic on Jacker, Link leaned against a tree to get some rest and recounted on the past few battle experiences, reflecting on his mistakes.

This was a habit he developed from playing the game in the real world. Wasn't there a saying that went, "the Holy Knight would not be defeated by the same tactics twice?"

Link was no Holy Knight, nor did he suffer any defeat. However, he was not perfect either, and he often reflected on those insufficiencies to ensure he did not commit the same mistake twice.

Even if I continue to invest Omni Points into my Maximum Mana, it would only be at 148 points, that's way too low! It would be fine if I cast Level-0 and Level-1 spells. However, one Level-2 spell consumes 20 Mana points, and a Level-3 spell consumes anywhere from 60 to 120 Mana points. I can only sustain casting one or two of these spells before I run out of Mana. The assault from the high-level Magician this time was especially dangerous, I would need to find a more efficient and faster way to replenish my Mana.

Link was still afflicted by the Ailing Magic status. When he fully recovers in two months, his Maximum Mana would be at 1480 points, equivalent to that of a Level-4 Magician. There was thus no reason for him to continue investing Omni Points into his Maximum Mana. The best alternative now was to find a faster way to replenish it.

Mana Recovery Potions can be an option; I should prepare those when I get back. However, the side effects of these potions are also strong. I should couple this with mana recovery spells.

Link vaguely remembered a Level-4 Secret Spell, Mana Surge. The cost was 50 Mana points and it could recover at least 80% of your Maximum Mana points in a short period of time after casting.

It was probably time to invest some Omni Points into learning this spell.

There was yet another problem with the battle today.

Though he emerged victorious, luck playing a major factor in his triumph. At the last few moments, if Andy were to be more patient and stall the battle for another five minutes, Jacker would not have been able to withstand the Crystal Golem's attack. With Jacker defeated, Link would have had to deal with both the Crystal Golem and Andy's assault, and the probability of his success would have been much lower. It was such a high-risk maneuver; if that continued something bad was bound to happen.

Link found this battling style to be uncomfortable. As a Magician, he preferred to be in control of the tempo of the battle. Also, in the event that he was unable to do so, he always had to have a trump card he could play in case of an emergency.

A battle like today's, where they unveiled every single tactic they had was disastrous.

Link couldn't help but think of the black-robed Magician.

That Dark Elf has been searching for the Occultic Runes, he should be the one working in the shadows to rescue Tarviss. He must be upset, letting an Occultic Rune slip by him like that, I will definitely see more of him in the future.

Link did not know the Dark Elf but was able to gauge his personality based on the battle they just had.

As with most Magicians, he does not like close quarters combat but prefers to plan in advance and control the flow of battle. I would probably have been unable to retaliate if I had walked right into his trap.

Speaking of traps, Link gestured to Jacker and Gildern to stay and went off alone to search for the untriggered traps set by the Magician. He cast an Aura of Detection over

himself and followed the trails of the Syndicate bandits. This time, he was calm and meticulous, inspecting every detail. Midway through the mountains, he stopped in his tracks.

There was something peculiar about the aura in this area. There was a small distortion, but peculiar nonetheless. In the midst of a raging battle, a single misstep would have landed the trap.

Link advanced cautiously, circling around the peculiar aura when he finally found the trap. He swiped the weeds off and revealed a flat rock, slightly illuminated by the silver-green light emanating from the rune formation carvings on it.

This was Rune Magic!

Rune Magic was merely a layman's term. In theory, it should have been termed as a high-level spellcasting technique. It worked by enchanting the magic structure into the rune formation before carving it onto a relatively flat surface.

Link observed the position of the runes and the elemental energy emanating from the stone. This spell ...

"It's Chain Lightning!" Link felt a shiver run down his spine.

Chain Lightning

Level-3 Lightning Spell

Effect: Attacks the target with lightning bolts. This attack will automatically jump and target other enemies that fall within a 9 feet radius for a maximum of 5 times.

Level-3 lightning spells were known for their destructive forces. If they had fallen into this trap, Gildern and himself probably would not have survived the attack. Jacker would still be alive due to his Battle Aura, but with the Syndicate bandits and the Level-4 Magician on his heels, the odds would not have been in his favor.

Link shuddered at the sight of this magic. "The opponents are getting stronger and craftier; I might have been lucky this time but I won't be forever. I need to craft some protective Magic Tools!"

Until now, he had been relying on his instincts and chose to be on the offensive. This

was an extremely dangerous style of fighting; a single mistake could cost him his life.

During an emergency such as an ambush or a trap, spellcasting was out of the question. He simply did not have enough time to go through the complicated process to cast a spell. He would need to acquire magic equipment that could store spells and release them almost instantaneously.

"I guess it's time to learn Alchemy and Enchanting spells to create my own Magic Tools!"

Link was a fast learner. Moreover, he preferred to use his own Magic Tools rather than ones crafted by others. He did not mind spending time acquiring this skill.

Gildern was done packing, dragging a full gunny sack of their spoils. The armor was made from a high-grade material, despite being damaged and the anti-magic daggers were all in good condition; they should sell for a good price.

"Let's head back and see if we can meet General Anderson on the way."

Five minutes into their return journey, they were greeted by the sound of footsteps and chatter. A fully armored knight emerged from the thick undergrowth. It was General Anderson!

Behind him was the River Cove Town Army, and their captain, Yaksha. There were about 200 soldiers, probably the fighting force of the entire River Cove Town.

Anderson clearly rushed here with full speed, his shiny armor now tainted by spots of dirt. After making sure that Link was unharmed, he heaved a sigh of relief.

Princess Annie had requested that he set off immediately to assist Link and ensure that he returned to the kingdom alive. Should the mission fail, she had personally ensured the same for his future in the kingdom.

He was delighted to see Link in one piece. "My Lord, how are you feeling?"

Link needed the River Cove Town Army to aid him in the search for the Syndicate's hideout. And so, he needed to be cooperative in order to ensure their assistance.

"The leader of the Syndicate and his men have already been eliminated by us. However, a Magician got away despite being injured," Link explained, "He was a Dark Elf and

might have escaped to the Syndicate's hideout."

The mention of a Dark Elf sent shivers down Anderson's spine. After the incident at Gladstone City, any occurrences related to the Dark Elves were bound to attract attention.

King Leon even gave a royal order to eliminate all Dark Elves in the Norton Kingdom. To think that the Syndicate got themselves tangled up in this mess.

How foolish! Anderson thought. Despite having strong connections in Hot Spring City, the Syndicate would definitely be completely uprooted this time around!

"Link, can you still fight?" Anderson asked.

You needed one Magician to deal with another. Anderson hoped that Link would accompany him in the search of the Syndicate's hideout.

Link shook his head. "My Mana is completely depleted. For the time being, I'll rest in River Cove Town, when you find the hideout, do not be hasty to attack, instead, please approach me to discuss a plan."

Even though he was on an investigative mission, the Girvent Forest was an extremely large area. The Syndicate's hideout was also well concealed—it was not possible to find it in a short amount of time and so there was no reason for him to tag along.

Upon seeing Link's tired and drained expression, Anderson nodded. "If there are any discoveries, I'll let you know. Please rest well."

"Yaksha, lets search for the bandit's hideout!" He hollered at the captain.

The elimination of the Syndicate was a personal order from Princess Annie and now, even the Dark Elves were involved. If he was successful in this mission, he would have made a great contribution to the kingdom. Anderson was enthusiastic.

His attitude put Link at ease. From the looks of it, the Syndicate should be of no threat to his Flamingo Band of Mercenaries. The only one left would be the Dark Elf Magician.

"Once we find clues of the hideout, we'll leave him with no means of escape!"

Link stepped aside and waited for Anderson to lead his forces into the forest. "Let's

return for our much-needed rest," Link said to Jacker and Gildern.

"Yes, My Lord."

Chapter 68

The Clandestine Guardian (1)

Even though Link had a fierce battle with the Syndicate at the Red Leaves Cove, the news of the incident had not reached the people of the River Cove town yet, so life here went on just as peacefully as before.

Link, Jacker, and Gildern were on their way back to the cabin in River Cove town that the mercenaries had bought. When they reached there, they noticed that the front door was wide open with two Warriors clad in iron armor standing guard there. Three carriages stood waiting outside. Link recognized one to be that of Annie's, but he'd never seen the other two before.

Just as he was dwelling on the identities of the owners of the two carriages, a white-robed Priest walked out of the cabin.

Link knew this Priest. He was from the Temple of Eichrod, the God of Dawn, in the River Cove town. His name was Pytor, and he was Level-3.

Eichrod, the God of Dawn was one of the Gods of the Realm of Light and he represented the first ray of light to shine on the world, bringing the end of darkness.

Legends said that he was the son of the Lord of Light and the Goddess of the Hunt, Achyllia. He had a warm and tender temperament and Priests devoted to him possessed powerful healing magic powers.

Pytor looked exhausted, and the aura around his body was dim, evidently from having spent much energy using strong divine healing magic.

"Princess Annie has invited a healing Priest here, so I think we can stop worrying about Lucy now," said Link to Jacker with a gentle smile on his face, visibly relieved.

When the three of them got nearer to the cabin, Pytor had gone into one of the carriages and went away, so there was only one unknown carriage left. It was plain and unadorned, and there was no crest or emblem on it which Link found to be quite suspicious.

"Mr. Link." One of the guards had recognized Link as they were about to enter the cabin, so he formally bowed and greeted him in a booming but polite voice.

His voice rang through the cabin, so anyone inside would've heard him clearly. Soon after, someone rushed outside—it was Annie. She quickly examined Link from head to toe. She then breathed easy once seeing that he suffered no serious injury.

"How did everything go?" she asked.

She had not reached the cabin long before Link arrived. Initially, she had planned to make sure that Lucy's condition was stable before going back to Red Leaves Cove. She did not expect Link to come back so quickly.

"Everything's fine now, more or less. Andy and his men are all dead. General Anderson is leading the militia into the forest to search for the Syndicate's lair," answered Link, while leading Jacker and Gildern into the cabin.

Under the effects of Link's Elemental Cure, Jacker had recovered considerably and his wounds were not life-threatening anymore. All he needed was some rest to restore his conditions, so Link ordered him to get some sleep while Gildern was dealing with the battle spoils.

Link and Annie then headed towards Lucy's room, and just as they reached the hall on the first floor, Link could clearly sense a mysterious Mana coming from Lucy's room.

Sensing Mana was a natural ability of all Magicians, but Link was much more sensitive than most Magicians, so he could sense it even though it was weak. In fact, the Mana was so weak that he couldn't sense it at all from outside the cabin. Nonetheless, based on the Mana that this person exuded, Link was sure that there must be a Master Magician in there!

"Is there someone else in Lucy's room?" Link asked Lucy, thinking of the strange carriage outside.

"You don't let anything escape from your eagle eyes, do you? Yes, there is a guest in the room, someone you'll be glad to meet, I'm sure. You'll understand once you go inside," explained Annie with a sweet smile on her face.

Link was even more intrigued now. He climbed up the stairs to the second floor, slowly opened the door to Lucy's room, and the scene inside slowly revealed itself to him.

Because the mercenaries had enough money after defeating the Dark Brotherhood, they could afford a decent-sized cabin. It was quite well-built too, being constructed of mud bricks, stone, and timber. It even had two stories, and Lucy's room was on the second floor where it got the most sunlight. A screen divided the room into two parts – the bedroom section and the sitting room section.

Link's view of the bedroom section was obscured by the screen when he entered the room. In the sitting room, though, he saw a woman with delicate features and long golden locks clad in a blue Magician's robe with silver linings. She had an elegant air about her. It was very dim in the sitting room, so the luminous aura exuded by the woman's body made her stand out starkly against the gloomy atmosphere of the room.

She was sitting at the table when Link found her, flipping through sheets of goatskin papers. When she heard the noise of someone opening the door, she raised her head. She saw that Link was about to say something, so she interrupted him.

"Shh! Lucy has just gone to sleep," said the mysterious guest.

"Who are you?" asked Link, lowering his voice as much as possible.

From her magic aura, he knew that this wasn't just an average Magician. In fact, he was sure her level must be far beyond his own. He now had a vague idea about the identity of the woman, because the goatskin papers in her hands looked very familiar.

The woman stood up, walked to the door and said, "Lucy's life is safe now, but she still needs a lot of rest. Let's go to the hall downstairs and we'll talk there."

Naturally, Link had no objections, so the three of them went downstairs. Once they reached the hall, the woman introduced herself, "I'm Moira. I'm sure you've heard of the name before."

Link had, of course, heard of her name before—she was Eliard's tutor. The two had never met before, but they had communicated with each other through many letters and Moira had helped explained many questions he had about magic.

"Thank you very much for your patient guidance," said Link, as he bowed. Those answers from Moira had been a great help to him, he had managed to circumvent so many false turns and dead ends in his studies of magic because of her.

Moira's smile widened and she stretched out her hand to invite Link to sit down. Then

she handed the papers to him. He took a glance at it and recognized that it was his revised thesis, then he turned back to Moira with a puzzled look.

"Do the celestial bodies really move this way?" asked Moira. Her voice turned serious when discussing these academic matters.

Link nodded. He now turned serious too.

"I had analyzed the astronomer Derek's 50 years' worth of observation data and deduced my theory from there. If the celestial bodies were each assigned a fixed path of orbit, then it would only have to be according to the way I described here," explained Link with much confidence.

The stars and the outer space were infinitely mysterious and fascinating, and in every world, there would always be some people who were attracted to its beauty. Derek was one of them in this world. He was a scholar from 300 years ago who had devoted his whole life to observing the sky and the stars. In his later years, he wrote down all his findings in a book called *Dreams of the Stars*. Although he gave it a poetic title, the contents were strictly scholarly and scientific and in it was Derek's own observation data of the movements of celestial bodies that he'd collected in 50 years.

In the world of Firuman, Derek's studies were mostly ignored. But because his observations were both detailed and accurate and because he wrote beautifully, his book had been passed down and read widely long after his death. Link had even found it in the small bookshop in River Cove town, so he bought it at the price of only five silver coins. It had been a great help to him while he was writing the thesis.

"But I could see that your theory is far from complete or perfect," said Moira. There was a glint in Moira's eyes when she was listening to his explanations, but she quickly hid it and kept her cool composure.

She seemed uninterested in matters of stars and space, which was understandable because stars were just too far away; they couldn't have much to do with magic or our daily lives at all.

"You're right. The theory is merely descriptive of how things behave, but as for the question of why they behave that way or where these laws came from, the theory offered no answers at all," said Link as he nodded.

"I heard from Eliard that there are still some parts of your thesis that you haven't

finished yet, could I take a look at them?" asked Moira. Her eyes were focused on the pendant made of fine gold chain around Link's neck.

"The manuscripts are in my... all right." Link had planned to tell Moira that his manuscripts were in his room in the River Cove Inn, but seeing her eyes now, it was obvious that he couldn't keep the matter of the storage gear a secret from the Master Magician. So Link pulled out the rest of this thesis from his storage pendant under Annie's startled gaze.

Fortunately, there was no one else there. Annie was a Princess, so the sight of a storage pendant wouldn't surprise her much, and he was sure nothing could be a more common sight to a Master Magician like Moira than a mere storage pendant.

As expected, Moira was completely unperturbed. She took the goatskin papers from Link and started to read through it for about an hour, as if no one else was there.

"Any magic academy in the world would open their doors wide to welcome you in for this thesis," said Moira more than an hour later. She put the thesis down then let out a long sigh.

"Does that mean that I can enter the East Cove Magic Academy now?" asked Link, excited by Moira's remark.

Moira nodded and said, "Actually, before I came here, your thesis on the Universal Law of Gravitation had been passed around for every tutor in the academy to peruse, and the dean, Master Magician Anthony himself had agreed to your admission. But since your innate talent in magic is very low, he had to raise your fees to 2000 gold coins to prevent other students from feeling they were unfairly treated... you wouldn't have any problem paying the fees, would you?"

"2000 gold coins? But that's too expensive! That's unfair!" Annie interjected.

"It was what the Dean Anthony ordered," said Moira shrugging, her expression signifying there was nothing she could do about it.

Annie said nothing more when she heard that it was an order from the dean of the academy. The dean was a Level-7 Master Magician and was highly regarded in the kingdom. Even her father, the Iron Duke, couldn't intervene with whatever the dean ordered.

Never mind, she thought. If Link couldn't afford to pay the fees, then she would just help him with it. It was only 2000 gold coins after all, and she had saved up that much money anyway.

Link himself had no problems with the order at all. All he wanted was to enter the academy. Now that he was admitted by the Dean, why would he let the small problem of money complicate the matter?

"I agree to the dean's orders," said Link, nodding.

There was still a nagging doubt in his mind, though. His Mana limit had now reached 148 points, and although he didn't have a lot of Mana in his body now, how could Moira, who was a Level-5 Magician, not notice it?

He was only 17 years old, but he possessed the Mana of a Level-2 Magician and had the ability to cast Level-2 spells in Gladstone. He had even used the Level-4 spell Flame Blast. All of this wasn't so hard to find out, so why did Moira still think his innate talent in magic was low?

Just as he was thinking about it, he heard Moira saying to Annie, "Your Highness, I must beg your leave to return to the academy now. Link, you'll go with me to the town, and on the way, I will discuss the rules of the academy with you."

Annie suspected nothing of what Moira said, so she gave them her leave. Even Link sensed nothing out of the ordinary of Moira's request, so all he did was nod and say "Of course."

Once he and Moira reached outside the cabin, Moira invited him into the carriage.

After having settled down inside the carriage, Moira snapped her fingers and immediately Link could feel the noise around him quieting down. All the noise outside, the people, the horse, the rolling of the wheels had turned silent.

Link was slightly taken aback. He knew this was the effects of the Soundproof Barrier, meaning that Moira was going to say something important to him.

He held his tongue even though questions ran through his head. He thought it best to let Moira start the conversation.

After a whole minute, Moira laughed and said, "Young man, I'm impressed with your

self-restraint. You must be dying to know why I would think your innate talent in magic is low, aren't you?"

"Well, you could easily identify my storage gear, so I thought it was very peculiar for you to make such an obvious error in judgment," replied Link.

"Because you would be Magician Bale's apprentice, and he wouldn't take any notice of you if you were just an apprentice with weak magic abilities. This way, you could get close to him and watch his every step without him suspecting you," said Moira, blurting out surprising revelations as if it was just a matter of fact.

Link was completely stupefied. He had absolutely no idea how to react to Moira's revelations. He had figured that this woman was no average Magician, but he hadn't expected her to baffle him this much.

In the game, the Level-6 Magician Bale was the turncoat in the magic academy. He had been secretly studying Dark Magic which in the end had led to the catastrophic accident in the academy. From Moira's words, he could sense that she was already suspecting that Bale was up to something sinister.

"I don't understand." Link couldn't think of a reason why Moira would choose him to spy on Bale; he didn't understand why she would trust him and was even more surprised at how she could've seen through what Bale was up to.

In fact, even the Master Magician Anthony had no idea about what Bale was planning to do. In the game, when the Magician Bale had attempted to summon the demons, the incident was only discovered at the very last minute, and before that, no one knew anything of Bale's secrets at all.

How could someone who had the acuity to apprehend all this before anyone else not be famous in the game? Who exactly was this Moira?

Moira could guess all the questions that were running through Link's head. She smiled and explained, "Because I'm not a human. I'm the secret guardian of the Realm of Light – an Angel of Light!"

"..."

Link was rendered completely speechless, and his eyes had widened as big as saucers.

Chapter 69

The Clandestine Guardian (2)

The Angels of Light were a Legendary race that appeared in many folklores across the World of Firuman. In these stories, the Angels of Light were protectors of the Gods; they were sacred and powerful, always fighting against the dark forces at the frontlines.

However, not many had truly seen an Angel of Light with their own eyes.

Link could not believe that the Magic Instructor from East Cove Higher Magic Academy was an Angel of Light. Furthermore, her motive was to inform him of certain secrets that had been kept for centuries.

"May I ask for your name, please," Link asked after he recollected himself. While he was playing the game, an Angel of Light could frequently be seen in the World of Firuman trying to save the World of Light from being constantly corroded by the dark forces. She was termed as one the Four Beauties, Herrera.

After playing for half a year, players would occasionally see Herrera.

When Herrera first awakened, her powers and beauty were average at best. However, as the players grew stronger, more of her powers awakened and eventually revealed her true identity as an Angel of Light.

Not all players were lucky enough to witness the true form of the Angel of Light. The first condition was to attain the Legendary state, which only 5% out of the billions of players managed to achieve.

While other players could see the Angel of Light through the data of Legendary players, the experience of meeting her in person was vastly different.

Even so, the sight of Herrera alone was sufficient for many.

She had an elegant and scared disposition. Seeing her would rid you of your evil thoughts and help you attain inner peace. Moira did not intend to keep her real name

a secret. "My name is Herrera, from the Sacred Land of Light. My mission is to assist the people in the World of Light in their fight against the dark forces. However, I won't interfere directly in the battles out of respect for the free will of life in this world."

It really was Herrera. Link was dumbfounded. He did meet her once when he played the game. However, they first met after the explosion of the East Cove Higher Magic, and not at the academy itself. In fact, her location prior to the explosion was a mystery, to think that she would be at the academy.

"Why did you approach me?" Link was puzzled.

"I descended onto the Mortal Realm 35 years ago. Two years ago, I awakened a memory where the God of Light hinted at the coming of the Chosen One. I have been waiting ever since. In the beginning, I thought the Chosen One was Eliard, but after reading your thesis, I had a feeling it was you, meeting you in person confirmed my hypothesis."

Link was speechless. He was indeed chosen by the God of Light to descend into this world. Although until now, he still refused to admit it.

Link's silence validated Herrera's hypothesis. A normal human wouldn't be able to stay so calm after her revelation that she was an Angel of Light.

She continued, "I discovered that Bale seems to be experimenting with dark magic. He has ventured too far into that area; there is a high chance he'll fall into deprivation. I need someone to investigate the situation for me. You seem to be the best choice."

An in-game message appeared in Link's field of vision.

Mission Activated: Suspicion

Task: Investigate Magician Bale and find evidence of his black magic research.

Reward: 25 Omni Points.

Link hesitated for a moment and then accepted the mission. After all, he really needed the Omni Points.

Link remained silent the entire time. Thinking that he was unwilling, Herrera spoke, "I will not interfere with your free will. If you are not willing to, you can still enter the

academy to practice magic, or even re-pick your magic instructor. You can also choose to become my disciple."

Link felt at ease listening to those words. Similar to his previous experience, Herrera still put emphasis on respecting the free will of the living. Completing her missions usually would garner you pretty decent rewards.

In essence, it was a privilege to converse with Herrera.

Link knew that Herrera had misunderstood, he said, "No, of course I am willing to. I'm just slightly worried."

"About what?" Herrera inquired.

"My real magic power is way above that of a normal academy student. The only reason I am so weak now is due to the side effect of a potent potion. A Level-6 Magician like you should have realized that by now right?"

"Indeed," Herrera nodded, "But that is not a problem at all."

Herrera took out a glimmering pure white feather surrounded by many sparkles. "Look carefully, every ball of light you see is a rune."

She gave this feather to Link. "Carrying it with you will cloak your aura, making you look like any other normal student."

Link carefully inspected the feather and a message appeared in the game system.

Cloaking Feather of the Angel of Light

Quality: Epic

Effect: Greatly reduces the magic aura that you emanate.

The moment Link came in contact with the feather, the feather transformed into a ball of light and circled his body, before disintegrating into the air.

Link peered into the mirror in the carriage. He had become as ordinary as any other student of the academy!

Herrera continued, "I have already made all the preparations. There is an empty slot in Bale's class. Give him 2000 gold coins as your tuition fee; he will not be able to resist such a huge amount of money. You have to be careful though, Bale is a vigilant man. You have to find a balance that allows you to grab his attention yet not raise his suspicion. Only then will you uncover the truth."

This was a tough request. Link thought for a moment and asked, "Is Bale in need of money?"

"Every Magician needs money," Herrera winked.

"I understand." Link already developed a plan to get close to Bale.

The carriage was now close to the exit of River Cove Town. Herrera spoke her final words, "Your thesis was intriguing. Your exposition on the orbit of the stars was accurate and you even brought in the discussion of the nature of space into your evaluation. However, you should never release this information to the public, at least not until you acquire the power to protect yourself. Do you understand?"

Link shuddered and gravely nodded his head, "I swear by my heart."

In the World of Firuman, knowledge could be directly translated into power. Before when Link was clueless, he only wished to gain the validation of the academy. He thought back on his actions and laughed. Luckily, he did not submit the full paper but only a part of it.

"Alright. Make your return and report to the academy in a month's time. Someone will lead you to Bale's Magic Tower."

The carriage pulled to a stop, waiting for Link to alight. Suddenly, a thought flashed across his mind. "Recently, I've been interested in alchemy and enchanting magic, can I borrow some books from you?"

"Of course." Herrera smiled.

Her hands glowed in a sacred light and reached into the space beside her. When the glow subsided, three books appeared in her hand: The Theory of Enchanting Magic, Foundational Enchanting, and Mid-High Level Enchanting Magic.

"The requirement to learn enchanting is much less as it does not require special tools.

As for alchemy, let's wait until you reach the academy," she said as she passed the books to Jacker.

Link was elated. "Thank you."

Herrera smiled, her eyes reflecting the dazzling sunlight of the Girvent Forest. With a voice as clear as water, she gently spoke, "You are the Chosen One. As the vessel of a god in the Mortal Realm, it is my responsibility to help you become stronger. As long as you don't fall to the dark side, I will do all I can to help you uncover the mysteries of magic."

The carriage door closed and rode on, slowly riding out of Link's field of vision.

With the weight of three books in his hand, Link thought, Fall to the dark side? What can the dark side offer me?

He clutched the necklace in front of his chest which housed the Magic Runes and Celine's Feather of Darkness, both of which emanated a strong aura of darkness.

A certain amount of research into the dark side is still necessary. Know thy enemy, right? Link was never one to completely follow the rules.

Chapter 70

Link's Matchstick Wand (1)

The Syndicate had covered their tracks well. Even after three days of thorough searching by General Anderson and the militia, their lair had still not been smoked out yet. There was nothing Link could do about it, so he decided to just wait patiently.

As for Princess Annie, she was ordered to report to the king in Springs City, so on the second day, she reluctantly left River Cove town. With no one left to disturb him, Link could finally dive back into his studies peacefully.

He was no longer staying in the inn attic but was staying in the cabin that the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had bought instead. There were people tending to his needs here and the food that the cook that they hired at a high price had prepared was delicious too. Most importantly, no one would disturb him here while he studied, so he settled down in the cabin contentedly.

Within three days, Link had finished reading three books on enchantment. From these books, he had developed a deep understanding on the subject. The opening of the book Introduction to Magic enchantments had very neatly encapsulated the concept of enchantment in a single sentence.

enchantment is the process of fixing spells onto a certain object.

Theoretically speaking, as long as the proper method was employed, any spell could be fixed onto an object, including Fireball, Protective Armor, Flying Blades, Hidden Power, and so on. The method and skills involved in fixing these spells fell under the field of enchantments.

Take the wand for example. The wand was, in fact, an object where Mana could be stably fixed on. According to folklore 500 years ago, Magicians used to cast spells without using wands. Therefore, there were two steps involved in their spellcasting – the first was to compress their own Mana into magic aura and then using this magic aura to release the spell that they intended to release. This made it much harder for the Magicians at that time to advance their skills compared to the present where Magicians used wands to cast their spells.

Having read the three books, Link turned his attention to writing letters. He had two of them to write: the first was to Moira, where he would write down all the questions he had concerning the contents of the textbooks and the second was a letter to Eliard.

Eliard shared many similar interests with him, and their intelligence was on roughly the same level as well so Link enjoyed talking to him about anything. Link would write to Eliard often, regardless of whether there was anything important to inform him on. They would often discuss their thoughts and comments on subjects about magic, or they would only share news and gossip they had come across. Whatever it was, they both enjoyed hearing from each other very much.

Link would have a lot of free time while waiting for the replies to his letters and he would spend it by conducting enchantment experiments in his room based on the theoretical and practical knowledge that he had just gleaned from the books.

The most commonly used metal in enchantment was Mithril because it was highly conductive for Mana. By molding Mithril into different configurations through various methods, a stable and long-term Mana storage device could be built. And through changing the structure of Mithril, the structure of Mana could be altered too, enabling the casting of different spells.

Those were the theories, anyway. In practice, though, one had to pay attention to numerous other details that would eventually affect the outcome, which was why Link wanted to conduct these experiments.

He didn't have any Mithril on hand, but that was fine because he could get some of it by breaking the New Moon wand apart. Although the wand wasn't of the highest quality, it did contain a decent amount of Mithril. In fact, Link managed to obtain a pound of Mithril after dismantling the wand.

What a waste, the 1000 gold coins' price was all spent on the Mithril in the wand. Was this supposed to be crafted by a master wandmaker? thought Link. He wondered if the wandmaker's reputation had been grossly exaggerated.

Once he'd obtained the Mithril, Link spent 20 Omni Points to purchase a transformation spell necessary for enchantment – Shapeshifter.

Shapeshifter

Level-2 Spell

Mana Consumption: 0.2 points per second

Effects: Once cast on a certain object, the object's physical shape will alter and change according to the spellcaster's wishes.

(Note: This is a necessary spell for low-level enchantments.)

After quickly learning this spell, Link immediately used it on the Mithril on the table.

The spell didn't require any special Mana focusing skills, so even a Magician's Apprentices' spellcasting skills were sufficient. As the Mana in Link's body got agitated and was arranged into a specific spell structure, a special force field would emerge.

This force field was almost invisible. If it didn't slightly bend the light that passed through it where it was concentrated in the palm of Link's hand, he wouldn't have noticed its existence at all.

Link knew that the force was known in transformation spells as the 'Higgs Force Field'.

This force field was discovered by a Magician called Higgs more than six hundred years ago and he was also the one who pioneered the field of transformation spells. His discovery had changed the enchantment skills from something that only high-level Magicians could do to something any average Magician could easily learn.

The Higgs Force Field had a strange property where it could transform any non-living objects' shape and properties. As long as your skill was developed enough, you could change metal to water, or even stone to gold.

But of course, the skills that were needed were very, very difficult to develop, and there was also another constraint – the huge Mana consumption rate.

The more properties of the object that was to be transformed, the higher the Mana consumption rate. For example, the ability to transform rock into gold at first glance might seem like an enticing idea that would enable one's fortune to grow infinitely. But in fact, it would take all of the Mana that a Level-6 Magician possessed just to transform a palm-sized cobblestone into gold of the same size and weight.

Nothing could be more precious to a Magician than his Mana, so no Magician in their right mind would ever waste all of their Mana for a mere palm-sized lump of gold. And so, no Magician has ever bothered to learn to transform rocks into gold.

As the adage went, there was no such thing as a free lunch in this world.

Now back to Link.

Link guided the transparent force field with his mind to wrap around the thumb-sized pile of Mithril on the table. Then he imagined the structure of the spell, Glass Orb in his head.

Link possessed an especially active imagination, so he could easily visualize things in his mind down to their smallest details. This skill worked in his favor when learning enchantment.

The pile of Mithril started to move and began to form into threads. The threads turned into magic runes and finally it transformed into a solid body of Mana structure, precisely the way Link visualized it in his mind.

About three minutes later, a shiny ball of Mithril was formed. At a glance, the orb seemed to be a normal ball of metal with a hollow structure, but when examined closely, it was an exact replica of the spell structure of Glass Orb.

Of course, there was no Mana in the Mithril threads, so it was presently only a hollow structure that was not able to capture the fire elements in the air. In short, right now it was just a pretty thing to look at.

Let's see if it works. Link picked up the small Mithril ball and focused his Mana into it.

This process did not require high concentration. All Link had to do was to pour his Mana into the ball. He didn't need to visualize the spell's structure because the Mithril threads would automatically guide the Mana into the structure of the glass orb.

Moments later, Mana filled the whole of the Mithril ball. When closely examined, Link could see that the Mithril ball was starting to light up, became blue, and finally grew into a glowing blue orb.

It was now a perfect facsimile of Link's spell Glass Orb.

"What a time-saving way to cast a spell. It did come at a high cost, though," Link said with a sigh. The spell had cost him 1000 gold coins, even an ostentatious Magician wouldn't choose to use such an expensive technique.

This was a Mithril-based glass orb, with the Mithril threads already in the configuration of the spell structure of Link's Glass Orb. This way, any Magician in the world capable of manipulating the Mana in their body would be able to unleash Glass Orbs. All they had to do was direct their Mana into the Mithril ball.

But of course, this technique was just too expensive to be practical. Not only was its power pitifully small, it could also only be used once, so it was only useful in experiments.

There was a description of the basic structure of magic wands in Basic enchantments, I think I'll try and replicate that.

So Link got himself a wooden stick. He then cast the Shapeshifter spell on the Mithril threads to move and fit it onto the stick according to the spell structure shown in the textbook. After that, he put on some finishing touches and then Link had successfully created his first basic magic wand from scratch.

Link was examining the crude wand in his hand that was lined with Mithril when a notification popped on his interface.

Basic Wand (Unnamed)

Poor Quality

Effects: Increases the power of spells by 5%.

That's not too bad. Link didn't mind that the wand was of poor quality because he had only spent half an hour to make it.

He tried casting spells with the new wand and thought it felt very nice in his hand.

"Ha! Isn't this interesting!" exclaimed Link, amused at how surprisingly good the wand was.

He successfully cast two more spells with the new wand. Now Link's interest towards enchantments deepened considerably. He remembered a chapter in Basic enchantment about the creation of magic scrolls.

Magic scrolls used special Mana-conductive ink. It involved the process of transferring the structure of spells onto a two-dimensional surface of an anti-magic sheet of paper.

The advantages of magic scrolls were that it was portable and cost-effective, and if Mana and activating magic runes were fixed onto the scrolls too, even laypeople could use them to cast spells.

Link wanted to try creating a magic scroll, but he didn't have any materials that were required. He didn't let that stop him though.

What to do when there was no Mana-conductive ink?

No problem. The source of magic-conductive ink was the blood of magical beings, and Magicians were one of those magical beings, so the blood of a Magician could be used as a substitute for Mana-conductive ink. The more powerful the Magician, the more effective their blood would be as Mana-conductive ink.

Without any reservation at all, Link took a few drops of blood from his own body.

But what about anti-magic paper? Well, in fact, goatskin paper was the most basic and the most common type of anti-magic paper, so Link had that covered too.

Now that he had all the materials he needed, Link dipped the quill into his own blood and then sketched the spell structure of Fireball onto the goatskin paper.

Link's ability to accurately imagine a structure worked in his favor in recreating the spell structure of Fireball in one smooth stroke onto the goatskin paper. He then incorporated the necessary activating magic runes and poured his Mana onto the scrolls.

Immediately, the blood-red ink on the goatskin paper emitted a magic aura, but because of the restrictions of the activating runes, the scroll did not absorb fire elements in the air, so no Fireball was formed.

Link wanted to test the effects of the scroll right away.

He activated the magic scroll according to the method in the books, which was to wipe away the activating runes and then hurl the scroll into the air.

The scroll absorbed and attracted fire elements in the air, then it started to catch fire and burst into a ball of flame. Because of the very simple spell structure and because the scroll was made with crude materials, the Fireball did not have much explosive power. But all in all, Link considered it a success.

"How fascinating!" Link's interest on enchantment grew even stronger now.

Soon after, letters for him arrived from the academy. He opened and read the one from Eliard first before carefully going through Moira's letter, where she had given him very clear and detailed answers to his questions. Along with the letters, Moira had also sent him three new textbooks: Wand Construction, Advanced Enchantment Skills, and Cutting-Edge Applications of the Higgs Force Field.

Link rejoiced at the titles of these books; he couldn't feel happier if he had been sent precious gemstones. After skimming through Wand Construction, he vowed that he was going to create a new wand for himself!

Chapter 71

Link's Matchstick Wand (2)

Three days had passed and the Royal Knight Anderson still had no success in the search for the Syndicate's hideout. This was much within Link's expectation. When he was playing the game, the Syndicate's hideout was well known for its secrecy. The hideout of the Dark Brotherhood was well-hidden, however the Syndicate's hideout was on a completely different level.

The Syndicate built their hideout to complement the geography of the land. They also used various spells and Divine Powers to conceal it. Even if a thorough search of Girvent Forest was done, luck still had to be on their side for the search to be successful. Link thus decided that he would take this time to focus on crafting his magic wand.

The strength of a Magician was largely dependent on the quality of his magic wand, which made the staff the most crucial part of a Magician's equipment. A powerful wand was extremely complicated to craft. The basic wand he crafted previously only managed to increase his magic power by a measly 5%.

He would probably be dismissed as grossly overestimating his own abilities if he told another Magician of his foolish attempts at crafting a wand after only six days of practice.

However, Link was never one to follow the rules. He always valued action over words and would set out to accomplish what he envisioned despite the odds.

He first needed to fully understand and absorb the knowledge in the three enchanting magic books Herrera had kindly given him.

"Lucy, I plan to do meditative training these next few days, just place any food outside my door and please do not interrupt my progress," Link gave Lucy a heads up.

"What if General Anderson is looking for you?" Lucy had already gotten used to Link's quirky habits of locking himself in his room and thought nothing of it.

"Anderson ... inform me if that happens." Link was left with no choice. He had promised to help out with the search previously and could not go back on his word, much less by locking himself in his room.

"I got it," Lucy nodded.

Link then started his research into the field of enchanting magic.

When he was awake, his eyes would be fixed on the books. He only slept three hours a day, and even when he slept he dreamt of enchanting magic. From a third person's perspective, he seemed to have gone slightly insane.

Link's brain was like a supercomputer. In a matter of three days, he was done with all three magic books.

"Enchanting magic is so interesting," Link exclaimed.

He started penning a letter to Herrera. He had so many newfound questions about the wondrous world of enchanting magic. After sending the letter, he started his experiments on enchanting magic without any delay.

Naturally, enchanting was a branch of magic. Through the work of many generations of Enchanters over the past 500 years, a complicated system of spells was finally developed—many of which were unique and powerful.

Link had to familiarize himself with some of the enchanting techniques before he started crafting his staff.

We are slightly lacking in resources, but that doesn't matter! Mithril is the only resource we need! Link delved into fanaticism yet again.

For the next few days, one could constantly hear sounds of explosion, laughter and even the howling of wind from Link's room. Initially, everyone was slightly afraid of what was happening, but they soon got accustomed to it.

Whenever an explosion sound was heard, they would look at each other and achieved a mutual understanding. "I guess ... Link's experiment ended in a failure yet again."

Three days passed. Herrera had sent her letter back to the academy. After reading through her answers, Link wrote down new questions from the experiments he

conducted the past few days and passed the letter to the messenger.

He never stopped working. And under such fanaticism, his enchanting magic level rose rapidly.

Time flew by; it had been two weeks, yet was already the fifth exchange of letters between Link and Herrera. General Anderson also tried his best to not disturb Link's training with superfluous things.

In the last two letters, Link had improved to the point where he could raise some objections to Herrera's answers, instead of just passively absorbing the knowledge. He had made major progress.

On the last day of the two weeks of training, there was a large explosion sound that came from Link's room. With his face covered in dust, his hair disheveled and his stained shirt, Link rushed out of his room holding a wooden stick in his hand. What caught everyone's attention was the fire crystal that sat at the tip of the stick. "I have succeeded! Yes!" Link ecstatically waved the wooden stick around. Wooden stick? ... No, it was a wand!

Magic Wand: Matchstick

Quality: Epic

Effect 1: Increases casting speed of fire magic by 20%.

Effect 2: Increases magic power by 50%.

Effect 3: Contains Level-3 magic: Might of a Giant (Released after charging)

(Note: Created by Magician Link)

Based on the rule of classification for magic equipment in the World of Firuman, an equipment with three additional effects was strong enough to be written into the annals of history, also known as epic quality.

Link dismantled both the Fire Crystal Staff and the New Moon Wand before attempting to combine both their materials together. Using the knowledge he gained in these past two weeks, he finally succeeded in creating this epic quality wand after many failures.

The wood of the wand came from the Fire Crystal Staff, which he thinned to lighten the weight and to increase movement speed. The tip of the wand had a huge fire crystal. At first glance, it looked simply like a giant matchstick, therefore the name.

This was probably the ugliest epic equipment in the history of Firuman.

Link got a reward of five Omni Points after crafting the wand and also developed his own understanding of enchanting magic. The whole process took him around 20 days, a progress much faster than the average Magician. This was partly due to his talent, but more so, his undivided attention and passion.

These few days, he skipped meals to conduct experiments and even dreamt about enchanting magic while he was asleep. He also had confidence in his control of magic, and was daring to conduct all sorts of experiments, as evidenced by the consistent explosion sounds.

It was not surprising that such a hardworking, fanatical genius could achieve these results. Lucy was the first person Link saw after rushing out of the room.

Lucy had already fully recovered from her injury. The power of divine spells was mind-blowing, not even a scar remained after recovery. Lucy looked well-rested and in the peak of health; she even looked like she had put on some weight!

Link was thrilled, and gave Lucy a tight hug. He attempted to make a spin while hugging her to celebrate his achievement but Lucy did not even budge. Lucy was half a head taller than Link, and though she looked slim and lightweight, she was a warrior, after all, and weighed much more than the average girl—it was impossible for Link to carry her with his weak physique. Link awkwardly withdrew his hands while Lucy blushed.

"How many gold coins do we have now after paying my tuition?" Link hastily changed the topic. He was too excited and lost his cool.

"We made 1300 gold coins from the sale of anti-magic equipment previously. On top of the 1500 gold coins you saved, we have 2800 gold coins in total," Lucy reported the numbers after she calmed down.

"We will leave 500 gold coins for our daily necessities. Instruct Jacker to purchase more Mithrils with the remaining gold coins, I will enchant the rest of your armor!" Link laughed.

Link was still not confident in enchanting other types of high-level equipment. However, he was confident enough to enchant basic equipment. He believed that for Jacker and the rest, the addition of a few magic attributes would be enough to greatly increase their power.

Most importantly, everyone now knew that the master of The Flamingo Band of Mercenaries was a strong wizard. Jacker had also become a Level-4 Warrior, while Lucy and Gildern had acquired Battle Aura and became Level-3. No one would look down on them anymore.

"Roger!" Lucy's eyes shone at the mention of magic equipment, ecstatically nodding her head.

Chapter 72

The Spiked Shield, the Gale Sword and the Executor's Bow

No shops in the River Cove town would openly sell such a precious and expensive metal as Mithril which was commonly used in magic spells. But that was not a problem to Jacker because he had his own bag of tricks.

Only a day after Link had explained everything about enchantment to Jacker, he managed to acquire ten pounds of high purity Mithril ore containing more than 60% Mithril by weight. He had spent 2300 gold coins on six pounds of Mithril – not a bad bargain at all.

The reason he could get so much for so little was because Mithril refining was an incredibly complicated process. This Mana conductive metal had an extremely high melting temperature, so normal flames were insufficient to extract them.

If you were a Magician, though, then nothing could be simpler. All Link had to do was to use a displacer spell and in no time, pure Mithril would be extricated out from the ore, giving them 6.2 pounds of Mithril.

Then, he took Jacker's shield, Lucy's sword and Gildern's bow, then went right back into his room and started tinkering with them.

"Give me three days' time." That was the last thing they heard of him before he disappeared into the room.

Outside the room, Jacker and the rest stared at each other, not knowing what was to become of their weapons after three days.

"I wonder what it would feel like wielding a magic shield," said Jacker, earnestly rubbing his hands, anticipating what would happen to his shield.

"Who knows?" said Lucy, "I've got sword practicing to do." She picked up her practicing iron sword, walked out, and started training with a wooden dummy outside

near the pavilion.

She seemed focused, but in fact, she was quite distracted today and it affected her performance. Usually, she could swiftly pierce through the dummy. Nine times out of ten she could easily stab the dummy accurately at its heart. But today, she could only manage to do that five times out of ten.

Ah, Link is only seventeen, and he's still as pure as a child, he'd probably get bullied in the academy. Lucy knew Link would be entering the academy soon, and she couldn't help but be worried for him.

Gildern was the only one who was the calmest and most focused among the three. His spirits had been jolted by the fierce battle with Andy and the Dark Elf Magician. He didn't want to feel helpless against a strong opponent as he did that day, so ever since then, he had been training like mad, trying his best to improve his archery skills. He was doing great too. His performance had been stuck on a plateau no matter how much he trained, but recently he had been making some real progress.

And so, three days' time had passed.

On the afternoon of the third day, Link walked out of his room yawning and noticed a servant sweeping the corridor.

"Tell Jon in the kitchen to get me something to eat, I'm hungry," ordered Link.

"Yes, my lord," said the servant before scurrying to the kitchen.

"If you see Jacker and the rest on your way, tell them to come and see me. Their weapons are ready," added Link before the servant got away. The servant nodded deferentially in response.

A few minutes later, Jacker, Lucy, and Gildern were all standing in front of Link's room. Lucy was holding a dish in her hands – it was roasted mutton rolls, her best dish.

Link beamed at the sight of the dish. He grabbed it from Lucy's hand and quickly stuffed the food into his mouth. At the same time, he pointed towards the room and said, "Your weapons are inside, you can go get them."

The three went in and saw a wooden shelf in the middle of Link's room. On it, there was a shield, a sword, and a bow. Three days earlier, these weapons were plain and

unremarkable, but now, they were unrecognizable even to the owners.

The heavy steel shield had become jet black, and its surface was now covered with rows and rows of thorns like porcupine spikes. The sword, on the other hand, seemed to be shrouded in a white light. When closely examined, one could see that this white light was caused by small vortices of air. And finally, Gildern's originally pale wooden bow was now pure black with lines of red aura running through its surface like blood vessels.

The eyes of the three mercenaries widened at the sight of their weapons. Their appearance alone would have been able to shock and intimidate anyone.

Link leaned on the wall beside the door chewing on the mutton roll. He smiled and said, "Jacker, I've added the spell, Thorn, and a low-level Guarding Barrier spell on your shield—the magic runes embedded into the shield will also strengthen it and protect you from impact. If you use the shield to block an attack, the opponent will feel the backlash of their attacks from the thorns. This will work for about 100 times. At the same time, the Guarding Barrier spell will protect you from any spell that is under Level-2. I've also fixed a recovery spell on the shield, so even if the shield suffers any physical damage, if it's allowed to recover for three days, it will revert to its original condition, so you could use this shield for as long as a year. After a year, I will have to pour my Mana into it to reinvigorate the magic properties of the shield, but I guess by then you should get yourself a new shield."

The spell, Recovery fell under the field of enchantment—its use was to extend the magical property of gear and weapons. In this world, the magical effects fixed on weapons generally faded over time. The only weapons that didn't fade over time were the ones that had undergone enchantment, and sacred or divine gear (or in other words, gear with mythical levels of quality).

Link's enchantment skills were only considered average now, and although he had a unique experience in building his own wand, his skill was still far removed from the level needed to produce sacred or divine weapons.

But even so, Jacker was more than happy with his newly improved shield. He picked up the brilliant shield, waved it back and forth a few times, and remarked, "This is the best shield I've ever laid my hands on!"

He discovered that not only was the shield boosted with magic spells, its shape and

physical properties had changed as well. The rough surface was gone and was replaced with a smooth and fine surface. There was an additional grip to prevent slip where the handle was, and even the center of gravity had been adjusted so it fit nicely in his hand, almost as if it were a part of his arm.

"My lord, does it have a name?" asked Jacker.

"If you don't mind, I'd name it Spiked Shield!" said Link with a laugh.

"What a good name." Jacker handled the shield carefully with both hands as if it were made of glass, afraid that he would break or damage it.

Lucy picked up her sword too and the moment it was in her hand, her eyes lit up. The sword was so light as if it had no weight at all, but once held in the hand, it felt as if it merged with her body—as if the sword was an extension of her arm.

"Try thrusting it forward," said Link, as he took another bite of the mutton roll. It was, in fact, his favorite dish. It was a pity he wouldn't get to eat it once he'd entered the academy.

Lucy did as she was instructed and thrust the sword forward.

Whoosh! The tiny air vortices around the blade of the sword suddenly merged and became one big whirlwind. It rushed forward in step with the swing of the sword and the resulting gust of wind was strong enough to topple a chair that was eight feet away.

"Do it one more time," said Link.

Lucy repeated the movement, and the moment she thrust the sword, a translucent dagger-shaped draught surged forth from the sword and shot through the air. It hit a wall 12 feet away. The wind blade scratched the stone wall, leaving a line on it and sent dust flying everywhere. If such power was directed towards human flesh, it would've done great harm.

Lucy believed that this extra aid from the air vortices would definitely give her an edge in battles and help compensate for her lack of physical strength.

"This is a divine weapon!" exclaimed Lucy, lovingly caressing the exquisite sword in her hand.

"It's far inferior to a divine weapon. You can call it Gale Sword," Link responded.

"Gale Sword? What a fitting name." Lucy carefully swiped the sword into its sheath. Just as Jacker cherished his new shield, Lucy's heart would be broken if a single scratch appeared on the sword's blade.

And finally, it was Gildern's turn.

He picked up the bow, nocked an arrow, and then pulled the string. Suddenly, the red aura on the bow accumulated at the tip of the arrow—this surprised him, so he relaxed the string, and the red aura flowed back into the bow.

"Don't be afraid. Try to shoot an arrow with it. How about aiming at that tree outside the window there?" said Link.

Gildern nodded, walked to the window then promptly shot an arrow at the tree.

Shwooosh! One moment later, Gildern could hear a sound coming from the tree, but the arrow he shot was nowhere in sight.

"Where did the arrow go?" the bemused Gildern asked.

"Inside the trunk of that tree," said Link, "Do you see that red aura on the tree?"

Gildern nodded, his face a picture of bewilderment.

"I've fixed a spell on the bow to stabilize the flight of your arrows. I've also fixed the spell, Sharpness on it. With these spells, your arrows will be extremely accurate, and it will be able to pierce through even the hardest surface. I call it the Executioner's Bow."

Gildern immediately hugged the bow to his chest, thinking he would never part with it. He thought the old deer skin haversack that he used to keep his bow in was not good enough for this bow anymore, so he decided to spend some money to buy a mink fur haversack instead.

These three mercenaries were such country bumpkins that it was the first time they'd ever seen or touched magic weapons. Unsurprisingly, they cherished them and treated their weapons with the utmost care.

"All right, now get back to work. I'm going to take a rest." Link waved his hands to dismiss his followers. He had also finished his meal.

He was very tired indeed, so after a quick wash up, he laid down on the bed and went straight to sleep.

He had a good night's rest. When he woke up, it was the morning of the next day. His spirits were now completely reinvigorated. He went downstairs to the main hall and found that a delicious looking breakfast had been laid out on the table and Jacker and the rest were already waiting for him to eat.

Link greeted them, then sat down and began to eat. The breakfast was scrumptious as it was prepared exactly to his taste, so he savored every bite.

Just when they were busy eating, there was a knock on the door. Link raised his head and saw a knight walking into the cabin. He wore a silver full body armor that was full of scratches and score marks and a pair of iron boots that were covered in dirt and mud. Once he was inside and saw Link, he immediately removed his iron helmet, revealing a face of exhaustion. It was the royal knight Anderson.

"Mr. Link, we've found the Syndicate's lair!"

What perfect timing!

Link nodded then greeted the knight, "General, come and have breakfast with us and clean your armor. After that, we'll all set out for the Syndicate together."

Anderson had rushed back overnight because it was an order from Princess Annie before she went to the capital. But he was absolutely fatigued and hungry, so he gratefully accepted Link's invitation. He walked into the main hall, thanked Link, then quickly gulped down the food on the table as soon as his butt settled on the chair.

By this time, Link and the mercenaries had all finished their meals.

"Let's get ready, then," said Link.

Chapter 73

The Sinister Bandit Hideout

Ample preparation was of the utmost importance before a battle. Jacker and the rest did an inspection of the equipment and brought along any other convenient tools they believed could help in their battle.

As Link possessed the dimensional pendant, he had the liberty to store more items—especially those that could be used in the case of emergencies, such as bread and water in case they got trapped.

Time stopped within the dimensional pendant. Link was thus not worried that these items would be corrupted by the Occultic Runes.

He also brought around 20 magic scrolls which he wrote during his free time. They contained Level-0 and Level-1 spells, allowing him to rapidly cast spells without consuming his Mana.

These magic scrolls indirectly increased Link's Maximum Mana, the thing limiting his battle competency. Lastly, Link also brought along a low-level Mana recovery potion.

He bought this potion for 20 gold coins from Herrera. This potion allowed him to recover 100 Mana instantly. Link was well prepared with gear to overcome his weakness of having a low Maximum Mana limit.

It wasn't long before they were ready. General Anderson also looked more refreshed after a satisfying meal. "Let's go," Link said.

Anderson was surprised at the quality of the magic weapons Link and his comrades had with them. He wanted to inquire more when his noble upbringing stopped him from poking into other's affairs.

He explained the situation to Link along the way.

"The bandit's hideout is too well-hidden, there are even conjuring spells cast around it. We're lucky enough to have even captured a Syndicate bandit after circling the

mountains for such a long time," Anderson said, "The hideout is hidden in a cave within a canyon and looks extremely suspicious and eerie. As we are afraid it will be reinforced with magic, we do not want to take any chances."

Anderson had a look of fear when talking about the hideout. He was clearly traumatized by something he saw in the canyon.

Jacker raised the question that was lingering in everyone's heart, "What do you mean by eerie?"

Anderson recounted what he had seen with a pale face, "After finding the canyon, I personally led a group of soldiers into the canyon to investigate. However, less than 60 feet in, we felt as though there was a voice in our head, similar to that of a demon's whisper trying to bewitch you to the dark side. Just when we were about to turn back, a soldier went insane, his eyes were bloodshot red and his body twitched uncontrollably, attacking everyone in sight. In the short process of our retreat, at least three soldiers lost their minds and we had no choice but to kill them. When we got out of the canyon and turned back to mourn for the dead soldiers, we saw them standing back on their feet again like zombies! Oh, in the name of the God of Light, I bet there is a Necromancer hiding in the canyon!"

Anderson was stricken with fear. His voice rose by a few decibels when he recounted the story and there was a genuine cloud of dread in his eyes.

Link frowned and cast an Aura Detection spell on himself.

Anderson's aura was immediately clear to him. The strongest aura surrounding him was green in color. Anderson was a Level-4 Royal Knight with a wind element Battle Aura—it was thus no surprise that his wind elemental aura would be strong. However, the outermost layer of his aura was covered by a thin black veil, with skeleton figures emerging ever so often. It was as though the aura itself was alive.

Anderson was cursed by a type of black magic. He was able to resist its full effect due to his strong powers, only causing it to slightly affect his demeanor.

In this period, Link had also been learning other spells in addition to enchanting spells, especially so when he felt like taking a break from his research into enchanting magic

One of them was the Level-2 spell, Guarding Barrier, and the other was a Level-1

dispelling spell.

Of course, as time was tight, these were all basic spells without any enchantment from Supreme Magic Skills, but they were more than sufficient to deal with the current situation.

Dispel spells consumed very few Mana points. The average Mana consumption for a Level-1 spell was six Mana Points, while a Level-1 dispelling spell only consumed 3 Mana points. Link's Maximum Mana now was full at 148 points. He pointed his wand at Anderson and released the dispelling spell.

A warm glow of light enveloped the wand and gently flowed towards Anderson like a trickle of clear spring water; it spiraled down his body and disappeared in a shining sparkle.

Link checked on Anderson once again using his Aura Detection spell. The black aura that was enveloping him had already disappeared. It seemed that it was merely a Level-1 curse, and while it was super effective on normal soldiers, it would not have a huge effect on strong opponents.

Under the effect of the magic, Anderson could clearly feel a weight off his shoulder and the grasp of fear gripping his heart slowly loosening. On his way back from the forest, he was pale and afraid to even stare into the dark corners of the forest.

Now, he could bask in the warm and comforting sunlight of the Girvent Forest and enjoy listening to the melodious chirping of birds. He took a deep breath of the fresh air lined with the refreshing smell of the clear morning dew. The fatigue from his sleepless night seemed to be instantaneously lifted.

"Feeling better?" Link laughed.

"I feel like I was reborn," Anderson chirped with joy.

"If I am not wrong, a black magic formation was placed in that canyon and it'll afflict anyone who enters with a curse. As for the resurrection of the dead, it could have been an illusion or indeed the work of a Necromancer, I cannot be sure until I have seen it with my own eyes."

"Can it be dispelled?" Anderson hastily asked.

"It's definitely possible if the origin of the magic can be traced," Link answered.

Actually, he knew the exact reason for the resurrection. It was neither illusion magic nor Necromancy, but a type of divine spell from the sacrificial altar of Shadow Stalker Morpheus.

Morpheus was an extremely powerful Legendary character at the pinnacle that had come into contact with the Origin. He was currently preparing a seal that could contain even the power of gods, explaining the abundance of sacrificial altars in the Syndicate's hideout. Many of the Syndicate's bandits worshipped Morpheus as a god, providing him with some sort of divine powers. However, he was unable to fully control such powers as he was technically still a mortal, hence causing some of these powers to remain in the sacrificial altars. It eventually turned into black magic that resurrected the dead as protectors of the altars.

These divine spells only targeted the dead, and as long as the sacrificial altar was destroyed, the curse would be broken; there was nothing to fear. With this knowledge, Link relaxed.

Link was an expert on magic, and Anderson knew. He had once witnessed the battle between him and the Syndicate's elite bandits, and experienced the power of Link's dispelling magic. Seeing how confident Link was had put him at ease.

After four hours of trekking, they finally reached the canyon where the Syndicate's hideout lay. Yaksha and the River Cove Army could be seen in a camp at the entrance of the canyon.

"Did anything happen while I was gone?" Anderson was concerned— he immediately inquired about the situation the moment he reached the campsite.

Yaksha was in a bad shape. He was pale and had bloodshot eyes, definitely the work of the curse. He shook his head and said, "It was extremely quiet since last night, much like a cemetery."

Yaksha was a Level-3 Warrior and had a decently strong Battle Aura. Link immediately cast a dispel spell on Yaksha.

He then set his sights on the canyon in front of him.

Compared to the game, this canyon looked way more majestic and intimidating. The

two sides of the canyon were at least 300 feet high and the gap was narrow at only 18 feet wide. There was also a blanket of uncomfortable eeriness aggravated by the lack of sunlight.

The howling wind sounded like cries of vengeful spirits as it passed through the narrow gap of the canyon. Coupled with the pitch black darkness, it indeed looked like the proverbial gate to hell.

The camp was at a slight distance from the canyon. "We need to get closer. General, Captain, I need the both of you to accompany me as you are the only ones that can resist the curse," Link requested.

The rest of the soldiers were mostly Level-1 and Level-2 Warriors— they would have difficulty fighting against the curse. On the other hand, it would be fine for Anderson, Yaksha, and his three followers.

Naturally, Level-3 Battle Aura could defend against a Level-1 curse.

The six of them then proceeded towards the canyon.

Link activated his Aura Detection spell and detected a thick dark miasma in the canyon. It was indeed only a Level-1 spell.

Link stepped into the canyon without any hesitation and his three followers confidently trailed behind him. Anderson, on the other hand, was still cautious, "Umm ... Link?"

"It's fine. Follow me."

Anderson and Yaksha followed begrudgingly.

Link immediately felt the bewitching voices that Anderson spoke of the moment he entered the canyon. There seemed to be a muffled voice in his head speaking things that he couldn't make sense of. Attempting to ignore it would send shivers down your spine. It felt like someone was breathing down your neck the entire time.

Other than Link, everyone showed signs of discomfort. Even the usually brave Jacker was hesitant in his steps.

"This is a curse of fear; ignore it, this is all it can do," Link said as he stepped forward

with big, confident strides.

If Link, the frailest of them all did not display any signs of fear, then the rest had no choice but to follow suit.

Suddenly, after around 120 feet, an unfamiliar sound could be heard. "Beware!" Jacker hollered and jumped in front of Link, raising his shield.

Bang! The arrow was deflected by the shield, leaving a white spot on its surface.

Despite the low visibility in the canyon, Gildern spotted the attacker and immediately fired a shot in that direction. A red flash sped past and a cry of pain could be heard from the other end of the canyon followed by a loud thud. The ambusher was killed.

"Look, he was still alive," Link mentioned.

The rest of the squad heaved a sigh of relief. They were not afraid to fight people who were alive; the undead, on the other hand...

It wasn't long before Link witnessed the resurrection of the dead with his own eyes.

The Syndicate bandit who was just shot dead started thrashing on the ground in occasional spasms. After ten seconds, he slowly stood up, his limbs in unnatural positions due to the fractures he suffered from his fall. It was indeed a terrifying scene.

"Look, he's alive again!" Anderson screamed in fear.

The corpse stood at its position for a moment before turning in the opposite direction and walking deeper into the canyon. It wasn't long before he disappeared from their field of vision.

"What do we do now, my lord?" Jacker whispered. This was all too strange. Why didn't the corpse attack them?

There were no signs of fear on Link's face. Instead, he pointed straight in the direction where the corpse was heading. "Follow its trail and find the magic formation causing the curse!"

Everyone was at a loss for words. Did this young Magician not know fear?

Link had already started walking, unfazed by what had just happened. The rest of them unwillingly followed in his footsteps, amazed yet puzzled at his courage.

Chapter 74

Trapped in a Labyrinth?

In the midst of the narrow passages of the cove, the group advanced 20 more yards before they encountered another sneak attack.

This time, two dark arrows were shot at them: one from the left and one from the right. Jacker raised his shield and managed to block the arrow from the left. On Link's right, Lucy was madly swinging her sword and the blade glinted in the dim light as she thrust her sword forward. Then, out from the tip of the blade came a strong gust of wind that sent the arrow flying in the opposite direction.

Anderson and Jacques were both staring dumbfounded at Lucy, stunned by the power of her sword. She then calmly sheathed her sword after the arrow had been deflected, paying no attention to the two men. Although the men were full of wonder and curiosity, they dared not say anything to her because of her intimidating cool attitude. Nonetheless, the extraordinary sword had left a great impression on them.

Link noticed Gildern was going to rush towards the enemies, so he said, "Gildern, leave one alive, don't kill them all!"

After hearing Link's instruction, Gildern killed one of the thieves with an arrow, then held back and carefully shot another arrow in order to not kill the target. Soon after, there were two cries of pain and a shadowy figure fell from the cliff and landed with a hard thud. The other one fell too, but he was still conscious. He waved his hands and feet mid-air to grasp at the rocky cliff face to slow down the speed of his fall. When he finally hit the ground, the thief wailed in pain but was still alive.

"Go, interrogate him." Link walked up to the falling figure, and the rest followed him.

Just as they were approaching the thieves, the corpse of the dead thief reanimated, just like the others before it, and climbed back up through the narrow passages of the cove back into the darkness. This time, a corpse had come back to life before of everyone's eyes, so they could plainly see the shocking disfigurements of the zombie.

The zombie's body was bent out of form. What was even more chilling was the

expression on the walking corpse's face—its empty eyes were wide open and blood and other bodily fluids uncontrollably oozed out of its mouth. Whenever it moved, its body would make cracking sounds due to its broken bones – it was simply a bone-chilling sight.

"By the Lord of Light, what a terrifying organization the Syndicate is!" muttered Anderson under his breath.

If he was lucky enough to survive this, he thought it pre-emptive to report whatever he'd seen today to the church. Such a sacrilegious organization must be cleansed and eliminated from its roots!

The zombie had walked into the darkness out of their sight, so Link walked towards the other thief and pointed his wand at him. The tip of the Fire Crystal staff lit up in a red aura, and under Link's precise control he shrouded the dying thief with the red light.

The light did no harm to the thief at all, but it was a good ploy to scare someone with no experience in magic. It worked very well, evidently, by the look of horror on the thief's face.

"Now, you have two options: one, answer my questions, or two, keep silent, and I will burn your soul!" threatened Link coldly with a mirthless laugh.

Before he could finish the sentence, the thief was scared witless.

"I'll answer your questions, please don't kill me!" he pleaded.

"Very good, you've made a clever choice."

Link's countenance softened slightly. He then asked, "What's going on in the cove? Why is it so dark?"

"Because a Magician had put a magic seal around the cove. The leader, Andy, said it would scare away the enemies of the Syndicate," answered the thief in a panicked voice.

"Magic seal? Where?" asked Link.

"In the main hall inside the cave, about 30 yards from here, one more turn along this

path and you'll find it."

"One more question, why did the dead thieves rise up again? And where are they going?" asked Link.

He had encountered nothing like this at the Syndicate's lair in the game so Link couldn't expect what was to come after this, neither could he figure out what exactly was going on.

Link's confidence in his own strength was unshaken, though, as he now had his Matchstick wand and his Mana was almost full. Moreover, by his side there were two Level-4 Warriors and three Level-3 professional mercenaries. He even brought along a big pile of magic scrolls. He was confident that all this was enough to help him face whatever the Syndicate was to throw at them.

"No, I can't tell you anything, otherwise the master will punish me. Please... Please don't force me!" answered the thief.

Link was taken aback by the response. His eyebrows furrowed, and the aura of the Fire Crystal shone even brighter now.

"Do you want to know how painful it is to have the Fire Crystal's flame burn your soul?" asked Link.

"No, I can't tell you... I can't tell you... Ahhhh!" Then, something unfathomable happened to the thief. His voice gradually became fainter and his pupils dilated until finally, he died.

Jacker walked up and checked the thief's body, then turned around and said to Link, "My lord, it seemed he was shocked to death."

Shocked to death? I don't think so, Link thought in disbelief.

Link used Aura Detection to scan the corpse and saw a black haze receding from the skull of the thief. This haze was much denser and even moved more quickly than the one that filled the atmosphere of the cove.

"No, he wasn't shocked to death. It's a curse. These thieves were cursed so as to not reveal anything about the zombies, otherwise, they would die," said Link.

Everyone was stunned by Link's explanation. This was the kind of demonic plot that would've made anyone's blood run cold!

Link noticed how everyone around him was petrified, so he added, "Don't worry, this curse involves a complicated process. It would require someone to swear an oath that would bind them to the curse, so rest assured that we won't find ourselves cursed without our knowing it."

This was common knowledge in magic. Since Link had read so many textbooks, he could easily see the tricks involved in the magic curse.

Everyone was instantly put at ease after hearing Link's explanation.

"Mr. Link, what should we do now?" the leader of the militia Jacques asked.

Among everyone present, he was the least experienced and the most spineless. He thought the shrewdest thing they should do right now was to retreat and escape from this dreadful place as soon as possible.

Before Link could answer, the dead thief started to move again. Link took a step back and waited until the corpse stood up and walked for about ten feet. Then he waved his hand and said, "Let's follow him. We'll see where they're going and find out once and for all what this is all about."

By now, everyone around Link was a bundle of nerves. Even the proud knight Anderson broke out in a cold sweat. Nonetheless, they all followed behind Link.

And so, a zombie teetered and tottered down the narrow winding path in the thick darkness of the cove while the young Magician followed behind as steady as a rock. The rest of the group who were all gulping in fear, followed closely behind him.

It turned out that the thief hadn't been lying about the cave. After following the zombie for about 60 feet, a corner appeared, just as described. There was another sneak attack, but the group was on high alert. The ambushers consisted of only two Level-2 thieves, and so they were easily killed off before they could even make a move. Shortly after being killed, the thieves stood up again and headed into a cave not far away from where they fell.

There was a bright torch hanging beside the cave entrance and its flickering flame cast long quivering shadows that looked like ghostly figures on the wall.

Soon, they almost lost sight of the three zombies as they were swallowed up by the pitch-black darkness of the cave.

"Illumination!"

With a wave of his wand, Link cast the spell to throw some light into the darkness. A bright and stable orb of light then appeared at the end of the wand. Not only did it light up the dark cave, it had also lifted the spirits of the whole group.

"Follow them," ordered Link to the group of Warriors behind him. Then he turned to Jacker who was walking in front with his shield raised.

"Jacker, be careful and stay alert."

"Yes, my lord," answered Jacker. He gripped his shield tightly and raised it higher. He felt his courage emboldened as the aura emanating from it spreads to his body.

And thus, the group furtively walked further into the depth of the cave in single file.

It was obvious that the cave was previously inhabited, as its walls were polished and dry. There were also torches posted every few yards. They even passed some rooms with tables and chairs inside them along the way too. From the signs of cups and food left on the tables in some of these rooms, it was apparent that some thieves had been resting in these rooms not too long ago.

Even so, Link and the rest of the group had not encountered anyone since entering the cave, except for the zombies in front of them who were shrouded in a thick black haze as they staggered into the dark underbelly of the cave.

They had walked along that serpentine cave passage for about 100 feet when they suddenly came upon a dimly lit, big round hall. There on the floor in the middle of the hall was a magic seal shrouded in a purple aura!

Link examined the runes on the magic seal, but he discovered that he didn't recognize any of the magic runes. He also noticed a thick black haze that seemed to spew out from the seal which made him think of what the thief had told him before – the magic seal must be the source of the curse.

He memorized the magic runes on the seal, then waved his hand and said, "Everyone step back into the passageway, I'm going to destroy this seal!"

Dismantling a magic seal was a simple procedure—all one had to do was destroy the runes on it. The only problem was that when the runes were destroyed, the harmony of the seal would be disrupted as well, and the energy that it contained would be imbalanced. This would then trigger an explosion – which was why Link had ordered everyone to step out of the hall.

So Link followed the rest as they stepped back into the cave passageway, and they retreated as far back as they could around a corner. Then Link unleashed three glass orbs and directed it towards the magic seal, carefully and precisely controlling the path of the orbs' trajectory.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Three explosions rang out through the cave. Soon after, there was another loud boom and then a burst of black haze gushed out from the hall like a strong current of water.

Even though the black haze was not a type of spell, it was still a harmful force that could do some serious damage to the body.

But Link was prepared for this. Immediately after the orbs exploded, he unleashed his magic scrolls which had the spell Level-1 spell, Guarding Barrier fixed on them.

There was a burst of white light and the spell in each scroll was released one by one. In total, there were six magic scrolls shielding everyone from the black haze. Just as the spells were cast, the black vapor surged through them, clashing with the spell. It protected them and the collision caused the white aura from the Guarding Barrier to shine even brighter. After three seconds, the black haze finally disappeared.

Something strange happened right after the black haze dissipated. Although the cave remained just as dark as before, somehow the oppressive dark atmosphere had vanished too, and the strange noises they heard in their heads were gone too.

It was a sign that the curse had been lifted.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Finally, there was a respite. They had almost been stretched to their limits by the stifling air in the cove and the nightmarish thoughts it produced in their minds.

"My lord, what should we do now?" asked Jacker.

Link considered it for a while and said, "The curse has been lifted. We should get out

of this cave now, then rally more militiamen together and come back later to search the cave."

Link was sure that it would be the safest course of action to retreat now and fight with more men later. There were more than a hundred militiamen in River Cove town and with the curse lifted, there was nothing stopping them from destroying the Syndicate's lair.

Everyone agreed, and they proceeded to retrace their steps through the winding cave passage back to the cave opening.

But then, something happened that made them stop dead in their tracks.

"Where did the cave opening go? I'm sure this is where we entered the cave!" shouted Jacker, visibly shaken. Everyone else almost jumped out of their skin too when they realized what was going on.

There hadn't been any forked passages, so it was impossible for them to have taken a wrong turn. They had retraced their steps precisely back to where they entered the cave. But instead of the cave opening, all they could see was an unending passage that stretched far into the darkness.

A slight crease appeared between Link's eyebrows. Then, he unleashed a glass orb at the cave wall in front. The orb exploded, causing the rocks of the cave wall to crumble and crack. This proved that the sight in front of them was not an illusion.

How did the cave turn into a labyrinth, then? It was something Link had never encountered in the game, so he was just as baffled as everyone else by the bizarre turn of events.

"Don't panic, just keep on walking!" said Link, suppressing even the slightest signs of fear and panic. He knew that he was the key member of this group that was holding them all together, so it was vital for him to keep calm and clear-headed.

Chapter 75

Through the Looking Glass

The Syndicate Hideout

...

After walking for a few hundred feet, Link and his comrades arrived back at the same hall where they first discovered the cursed magic formation.

"We are back here again. We will be trapped in here forever." Fear and desperation were written all over Captain Jacques' face.

After arriving back at the same hall for the third time, Jacques, the most emotionally volatile of the group, was already on the verge of collapse. The rest also felt discouraged, perturbed by their current situation.

"Let's not jump to conclusions and take a rest." Link's voice was as calm as ever.

Link walked towards a rattan chair in the corner of the hall and sat down. A beam of light was then released from his wand, illuminating the table in front of him. When the blinding light dissipated, bread and water had appeared on the table top.

Naturally, this was taken from his dimensional pendant, however, in order to boost the morale of the squad, Link pretended to be able to create food out of thin air, "Do not worry! Even if we are trapped, we will not starve, we have ample time to figure out a plan."

The amount of food in the dimensional pendant could last six of them for at least half a month. Link was confident that he could find a way out of this maze in that time. Even if the food ran out, he could still use Elemental Healing magic to replenish the energy of the squad.

In fact, there were spells that allowed Magicians to create food and water, except that Link did not bother to learn those superfluous spells. If needed, a Magician could stay alive simply by casting Elemental Healing on himself in replacement for food.

In other words, as long as Link had Mana, the six of them would not die of starvation or thirst.

Link was therefore calm.

Link's words and the presence of food relieved the tension and negativity that was in the hall. After all, the lack of food and water was the greatest problem if they were going to be trapped. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

The fact that Link could create food and water with magic also went uncontested. In any case, magic could do almost anything, creating food and water was nothing unusual.

Jacker immediately sat down and took a bite of the bread. After chewing for a few moments, he exclaimed, "This bread tastes exactly like the ones John made! Delicious!

Link smiled. It was made by John.

The rest soon formed a circle to satisfy their growling stomachs after their long walk.

After a hearty meal, everyone was feeling a lot more enthusiastic. Even Jacques looked ready to continue despite his pale demeanor.

Link observed his surroundings.

This was indeed the hall where the cursed magic formation lay, marks of its destruction could still be seen clearly on the ground. However, if you continued walking straight after passing through the exit, you would end up walking back to this hall.

As for the exit that lead back to the canyon, it was nowhere to be found.

This was preposterous. It was understandable that Captain Jacques would be terrified. In fact, Jacker, Anderson, Lucy, and Gildern were also out of ideas and waited for Link to give instructions.

Link did not manage to find any clues. After some rest, he suggested, "Let's try it once more but at a slower pace this time."

The rest trudged their bodies along and followed Link.

Link carefully observed the changes in the corridors as they passed. When they reached the exit that was supposed to lead them out of the cave, Link stopped and set his sights on the path ahead of him.

It seemed normal enough, but there was something strange. Link was perplexed, he could not explain this eeriness. In fact, it was familiarity he was feeling.

Link stayed stationary for a long time, carefully observing the path ahead of him. He compared its details with all those that he painstakingly memorized on their way here.

Link had discovered the trick.

The path ahead of them was, in fact, a mirror image of the current path they were on!

A certain person or spell had placed a theoretical mirror in the location that was supposed to lead them out of the cave. You could walk through this mirror, and that caused them to walk in circles.

Previously, Link and his comrades had been walking again and again into the mirror and back to the hall.

This mirror magic was perfectly cast, even the gaps had been meticulously patched up. You couldn't see any peculiarities in the walls of the cave or the contours of the ground—it looked natural.

It was lucky that Link was observant enough.

He immediately thought of a spell: Dimensional Mirror.

Dimensional Mirror

Level-11 Legendary spell

Effect: Creates a dimension and links it to the real world, forming a closed dimensional loop.

(Note: This spell is a staple in creating an ultimate maze!)

When he was playing the game, this was Link's favorite spell to use after he reached the rank of Legendary. He loved to trick his opponent with it and subsequently

controlled their movements. For a moment, he was revered as the Demon King of Mazes.

However, it was much easier to see the loopholes in the spell when playing the game. In this world, the Dimensional Mirror was almost perfect, definitely capable of trapping a person in this loop infinitely.

Link was troubled yet again. This was a Legendary spell and there was no way he could dispel it. They had two options: the first was to clear a path from the gap where the mirror was connected to the cave walls, digging a tunnel that linked them to the outside world.

However, this was extremely risky. The exit that they created could once again be sabotaged by the same magic.

The second option was to continue walking to the deepest parts of the corridor to see if there were any new discoveries.

This was also dangerous, albeit less so than the former. Link thought for a moment and chose the second option.

"My lord, did you find anything significant?" Jacker asked.

Link nodded and said, "We are now caught in a loop by an extremely powerful magic and I am not strong enough to dispel it. However, we have a chance of escaping. Let's walk back to the deepest part of this cave and we may find something we need."

The presence of a Legendary spell meant that there was a Legendary spellcaster nearby, and the only one that fitted the criteria was none other than the leader of the Syndicate, Morpheus.

However, Link was convinced that Morpheus was not in this cave. If Morpheus desired, he could have defeated them easily with one or two spells; there was no need to set up a Dimensional Mirror spell.

Link thus inferred that because Morpheus's real self was not present, his sacrificial altar was nearby instead, allowing him to extend a part of his power to create the Dimensional Mirror.

Link was also convinced that Morpheus could not extend much of his power as the

Dimensional Mirror was not a Mana consuming spell. The crucial part of this spell was the user's familiarity with the space. If Morpheus had a stronger outreach, he could also have easily captured them due to the vast difference in their powers.

After thinking it through, Link felt that he had a chance.

As the exit was sealed, the only other option was to go deeper into the cave. All though the rest were not willing to, they followed suit.

Jacques trailed timidly behind as he was afraid to be alone.

The other exit in the hall lead to the deepest part of the cave. It was also the direction the undead were heading towards.

Similar to what they did previously, Jacker raised his shield and took on the role of a front scout while Link cast his Illumination spell. Everyone else surrounded Link to protect him.

Along the way, they saw many rooms made out of stone.

Some of these rooms were used for storage, some to house weapons, and the more luxuriously decorated ones should be the living quarters of the Syndicate leaders.

At that moment, Syndicate bandits sprung out of nowhere. However, they were merely Level-1 and Level-2 bandits and were no match for the squad.

Link and his comrades had a rather smooth journey and killed around 30 Syndicate bandits on the way. The only eerie thing that happened was the resurrection of the lifeless bandits and their suspicious actions of running straight towards the deepest part of the cave, despite the severity of their injuries.

They came back to life even after they were beheaded.

This was getting too much even for Link to handle. "Chop off their limbs! Do not let them revive!" he shouted. He felt that there was more to this than what met the eye!

Everyone else was also terrified of the indiscriminate resurrection. They became a lot crueller and dismembered the bodies of the bandits, hoping that this would stop the resurrection process.

"Damn it, they are still reviving and moving!" Jacques hollered.

A dismembered body without limbs was crawling its way deeper into the cave like a giant slug. His severed limbs flung around on the ground desperately trying to head deeper into the cave as well. This was way too traumatizing to look at.

"Burn them all!" This was also Link's first time seeing such a horrific scene, it was usually censored when he played the game.

The separate body parts were still struggling even when they were getting toasted by the fire. Despite the boiling blisters, they continued to move towards their goal and only stopped in their tracks after becoming completely charred.

Everyone was speechless. Just what exactly was lying in wait for them in the deepest part of the cave?

Chapter 76

Blasphemers?

Despite encountering hair-raising situations along the way, Link and the rest of the group had no other choice but to soldier on.

"We must have provoked the ire of the demons! We're all going to die!" muttered Jacques. Recent events had obviously scared the daylight out of him.

"Stop your bleating, you coward!" snapped Jacker, gradually becoming impatient with the leader of the militia.

Jacques would not have tolerated such brazen insults in normal circumstances without countering with a curt retort. But this time, he merely responded by massaging his temple with his fingers.

"I shouldn't have come to this damned place," murmured Jacques under his breath.

Anderson heard it though, and that was the last straw. He felt it was his duty as a royal knight and the official commander of this mission to teach Jacques a lesson, so he gave him a hard slap across the face.

"Silence! Have you forgotten your duty to obey your orders?" barked Anderson.

It wasn't that Anderson was unperturbed by the things they'd encountered himself, but he knew that panicking would only serve to exacerbate the problem. The most important thing to do in dire situations like the one they were in now was to stay as calm as possible.

Anderson also knew that Jacques's cowardice had been lowering everyone's morale. If they were at war now, he would not hesitate to eliminate this soldier with a stab to the heart.

The slap was violent enough to make one of Jacques's teeth fall out of his mouth, filling his mouth with blood. He glared at Anderson but dared not utter a sound.

This may have seemed like a tiny spat within the team, but it was in no small part caused by the underlying tension they all felt at the time coming to a head.

Link knew this, and he was sure that if they did not find a way out of here quickly, the internal strife might devolve into mutiny soon. He could not let that happen.

Just then, they encountered another room. As it was with the other rooms, no one was inside. There was something slightly different with this room, though. Instead of just the tables and chairs, there was a small bookshelf in the corner and a pile of scrolls on the table. Link examined the scrolls and discovered that these weren't regular documents, but were all scrolls filled with magic runes.

Link had a strong premonition that the room belonged to that Dark Elf Magician.

He examined each scroll more thoroughly and found out that they were mostly theories of how to improve inefficient spells. All in all, the scrolls contained nothing special, only basic theories of magic.

Then as he flipped through the scrolls, a letter that was slipped between the scrolls fell out. Link picked it up and opened it, then saw that it was written in Dark Elven characters.

To the average person, Dark Elf writing was nothing but illegible scribbling with no apparent rhyme or rules to them, where each character looked like funny little tadpoles. Link was no different from the average person in this regard, so the letter's contents were completely beyond his comprehension.

Then, an extraordinary thing happened. As he picked up the letter, a notification popped up on the interface. It showed the contents of the letter.

My dear friend, Felidia...

Link was jolted by the mention of the name Felidia. He never thought that the black-robed Magician was, in fact, such a prominent figure in the game.

Felidia, the gifted Dark Elf Magician, was a member of the Silver Moon Mage Council. Link recalled from his memory of the game that five years after the bloodshed in Gladstone, Felidia fought Eliard, who was by then a Level-7 Magician and the most gifted Magician among humans, in a famous battle at the Mirror Lake.

Their battle was a tie, and the aftershock of the battle had even caused the area of the lake to increase twofold.

Felidia was a young Magician himself. He should only be 23 years old now. And because Dark Elves usually lived up to 100 years old, Felidia could be considered about the same age as Link and Eliard. But unlike Link and Eliard, Felidia was now already a Level-4 Magician!

I can't believe the black-robed Magician was him! Link was stunned, but now he understood why this Magician could be so bold as to create havoc in a place so near to the capital city. What did a genius Magician with strong magical skills have to fear?

Link continued to read the rest of the letter. The first half consisted of trivial talks between two close friends, but he spotted key information in the middle of the letter – a place called Howling Wind Cliff.

It was the place where Felidia's friend stayed, and from the descriptions in the letter, Link could work out that the place was within the Norton kingdom. In other words, this friend of Felidia was his accomplice in this kingdom.

Felidia was hurt in the last battle, and he's not in the cave, so he must've gone into hiding at his friend's place to recover. I must find this friend of his. Even if he wasn't with him, there must be something we could find out from him about Felidia's plans! Link thought.

Just as Link was coming up with this plan, a notification popped up on the interface.

Mission Completed: Search for Clues.

Player rewarded with 20 Omni Points.

New Mission Activated: Escape.

Mission Details: Escape from the Syndicate's lair and find the Howling Wind Cliff.

Mission Rewards: 50 Omni Points.

Fifty Omni points? It was a surprisingly generous reward. Although, when Link thought about it, whether it was to escape from the Syndicate's lair or to locate the Howling Wind Cliff – both parts of the mission were exceedingly difficult.

But before thinking about escaping from the lair, Link first had to figure out the situation they were in right now. He was baffled by the presence of the high-level spells in the cave and was wary of what the darkness of the cave could be hiding or what could emerge from it to attack them.

As for the Howling Wind Cliff, Link himself had never even heard of the place before. The Firuman continent was vast. Even the Norton kingdom alone was about a thousand miles at its radius. If he was to look for this place alone without any help, it would probably take forever to find it. But Link was not without friends, so there was hope.

Right now, though, he had to focus on getting out of this cave.

He put the letter and the scrolls back down on the table, then walked over to the bookshelf. He flipped through some of the books and discovered that the books weren't about magic at all.

Link decided that they weren't worth his time, so he turned to the group and said, "Let's go, we have to keep looking for a way out."

The crowd continued forward. They passed a few more rooms and encountered 30 more Syndicate thieves. Link killed and burned half of them, but some came back to life before Link could burn them, and they all headed deep into the cave.

The group was unnerved by how determined the undead was to walk towards the depth of the cave.

"It's like they're puppets and someone is pulling strings in the dark controlling their movement," said Lucy.

"Could it be that there's an undead Magician in there? But why wouldn't the Magician come for us face-to-face?" said Anderson.

"There's no use guessing," said Link, shaking his head, "We must follow them and find out once and for all. But no matter who the opponent was, I don't think he's all that strong, otherwise, he wouldn't be using the undead or trap us in this labyrinthine cave, all the while not lifting a finger to attack us directly."

"My lord, I agree. It seems that the opponent is wary our power!" said Lucy. What Link said made a lot of sense to everyone, and all nodded except Jacques.

Jacques made no sound, not because he disagreed, but because he feared Anderson's harsh lessons.

As they headed into the depths of the cave for another 100 yard, the group finally reached the innermost chamber of the cave.

Eerily enough, they found themselves in a large hall of about fifty yards wide. And in the middle of the hall, there was a jet-black statue wearing a large cloak, veiled in a dark hazy shadow. Around it was a ring of candles with flickering flames, and surrounding the candles were a horde of silent undead.

There were quite a number of undead there, probably about fifty of them, all of which were the Syndicate thieves killed by Link and the team. Once they entered the hall, the undead all simultaneously turned towards them with their dead eyes, staring vacantly at them.

The dark subterranean hall, the black statue with a row of white candles around it, and the silent pilgrimage of the undead – all of it combined to produce a blood-curdling scene from hell.

Everyone was scared stiff at this point. But suddenly, the eyes of the statue glowed in a dim red light. Then, a sinister androgynous voice rang out through the hall, saying, "Do you mortals know how blasphemers pay for their unpardonable sin? That's right, you'll have to pay with your souls! Oh, what delicious souls you have here!"

Chapter 77

A Mortal's Wisdom

The deepest area of the Syndicate's hideout.

...

No one could determine the origin of the voice. It seemed to be directly transferred to their minds. What was more terrifying was the content.

Mortals? Blatant disregard? Holy Land? Only a God would speak of those words.

Amongst the warriors, Anderson had the most experience in battle and so he took a few steps backward and shouted, "It's not looking good, we seem to have unknowingly stepped into the forbidden grounds of a dark evil god's sacrificial altar!"

A secluded cave, eerie undead, strange cursed magic formations, what else could it be other than an evil god?

Captain Jacques' body began trembling and he screamed in a high pitched voice, "Oh my god!"

Following which, he spun around and ran back to where they came from, cowering in fear.

Alright, that was one man down.

To the common man, a god was mysterious, strong and as intangible as the stars in the night sky—an existence that they could never hope to understand, much less stand up against.

The only way to fight against a god was to render the assistance of another.

Jacker and Gildern also froze upon hearing those words. If not for their adventures with Link and their pledge to the God of Light to protect Link, they would most probably have run off together with Jacques.

"My lord, what do we do now?" He asked. In his eyes, Link was as collected as ever, as though he was just dealing with an ordinary opponent.

He had no idea how Link could stay so calm, but based on his past experiences, he knew that Link definitely had a way to get them out of this mess.

Apart from Link, one other person was exceptionally calm, and that person was Lucy.

The moment she heard the sinister voice, she unsheathed her sword and prepared herself for battle. She smirked when she saw Jacques running away in fear.

"To think that such cowards are protecting River Cove Town. What a joke."

Naturally, she also felt terrified, but after her close shave from death while escaping from the Syndicate, her attitude towards life had changed. To her, now death was but a destination that everyone would finally arrive at.

If Link lived, there would be hope. However, if Link was met with misfortune, she would accompany him to the lands of the dead.

Before Link could answer Jacker's question, sounds of hurried footsteps could be heard, and a disheveled Jacques once again emerged from the corridors.

Looking at Link and the others, Jacques had an incredulous expression. This was way out of his expectations. He collapsed to the ground and mumbled, "How can this possible? How...?"

Link immediately knew the reason. "This corridor has also been sealed. It's pointless to run, the only way out now is to fight!"

"But how?" Anderson softly whispered.

"Destroy the sacrificial altar!" Link spoke without hesitation. At the same time, he pointed his wand at the statue on the altar and fired a glass orb in that direction.

Boom! The shockwaves from the explosion flung centuries-old dirt from the ground and extinguished the candles, causing the hall to descend into darkness. But almost immediately after, the hall was illuminated by another source of light.

A blood-red light surrounded the sacrificial altar, forming a dome of light. From the

visibility brought by this faint light, Link could tell that his attack had completely no effect on the altar.

Even stranger things started taking place. The eyes of the statue started glowing in an eerie black light and slowly began to move like a sentient being.

That wasn't all.

The 50-odd undead in the hall started moving towards the statue as though they were summoned by a higher being. As they moved closer, white balls of light started to emerge from their bodies. When they made contact with the blood-red light dome, these balls of white light transformed into a black sinister cloud of gas and was absorbed by the statue.

Once the white light was absorbed, the undead collapsed onto the floor as though they lost all energy, before rapidly decomposing into piles of ashes.

The speed of the statue increased with every absorption of the sinister black cloud of gas.

"Oh my, the god has revived and is here to eliminate us!" Jacques screamed and ran into the corridor once again. It seemed like they would have to make do with one less person for this fight.

"Link, please think of something!" Anderson was also on the verge of a breakdown, there were probably not many things more terrifying than an evil god statue reviving right in front of your eyes.

In folklore, a god would not only destroy your physical body, but would also torment your soul until your existence was completely destroyed for all eternity. For many Warriors, the death of their physical bodies was not something to be feared, but the destruction of their soul struck fear in their hearts.

Jacker, Lucy, and Gildern held their weapons tightly while chanting the holy name of the God of Light, hoping for his divine protection.

Link, on the other hand, frowned and carefully observed the changes that were happening to the statue.

The statue was extremely sturdy, as evidenced by the ineffectiveness of Link's attack.

However, the absorption of the energy of the undead exposed a clear weakness.

It was that Shadow Stalker Morpheus could not freely control his powers in this space, in fact, he was heavily restricted, so much so that he had to make use of the powers only available in this space. His power here was most likely only enough to sustain the Legendary spell, Dimensional Mirror.

In other words, their only opponent was the statue in front of them.

At this thought, Link commanded in a deep voice, "There is nothing to fear, it's just a stone statue. In the name of the God of Light, purify it!"

Link pointed his wand at Jacker and released Might of a Giant, the spell stored inside his wand. A beam of runes was immediately projected onto Jacker and absorbed by his body.

In an instant, the muscles of Jacker's body shined with a golden glow and became more defined. However, he was already a Level-4 Warrior, thus reducing the effectiveness of the spell. Instead of tripling his strength, it increased his strength by a multiplier of 2.5.

The final result was a strength comparable to that of a Level-5 Warrior.

But that was hardly all the tricks Link had up his sleeve.

Jacker was the strongest Warrior in their squad and was thus tasked to face the statue head on, absorbing the damage. Despite the strengthening spell and the use of a shield, Jacker still struggled to match up with the statue. Link then cast a Level-2 Guarding Barrier spell to further enhance his capabilities.

At the same time, Link took out all the magic scrolls he prepared and released the magic contained within them, giving all members of the squad a Level-1 Cat's Agility buff.

Link hollered, "Don't hesitate, first destroy the undead and stop the statue from absorbing more power!"

The strength of the statue was directly proportional to the number undead it absorbed. The fewer the number of undead who reached the blood-red light dome, the weaker its battle power. Link wasted no time and bombarded the undead army

with his Whistle spell.

Holding a handful of iron dust in his left hand, he raised his wand in the direction of the undead. He felt magical energy surge into the wand before it was compressed and manipulated to make up the accurate spell structure. Fire and earth element particles were then concentrated to the tip of the wand, causing the fire crystal to glow. After 0.2 seconds, a whirling, high-pitched whistle was created at the tip of the wand.

Fwooshh! The spell was launched towards the blood-red dome. Link was testing the strength of the dome.

The attack caused a giant explosion and created airborne metallic pieces that scattered everywhere. However, the blood-red light dome was barely scratched—not even a ripple was generated. This dome was extremely sturdy, way above the power of the Whistle spell.

Link immediately gave up on his assault on the light dome, with another whistle formed at the tip of his wand, he aimed and fired it at the legs of an undead. The whistle penetrated deep into the limbs and was blown apart by the explosion that followed soon after. The undead subsequently lost its balance and fell to the ground.

It was unsurprising that the undead continued crawling towards the statue, albeit at a slower pace.

"Hey!" Anderson understood what Link was doing and dashed forward. His weapon was a two-handed heavy sword, and while it prevented him from defending against attacks, its destructive force was top notch.

A Level-4 Warrior wielding a heavy sword 5'4" in length and 15 inches in width dashing headlong into a group of undead was akin to a tiger entering a herd of sheep. The undead had no chance to even defend themselves before they were brutally dismembered.

Jacker remained vigilant and defensive besides Link, while Lucy and Gildern began their assault.

Lucy's weapon was the Gale sword. The sword was extremely light and that allowed Lucy to attack at an insane speed, like a strong gust of wind, both sharp and lethal. She weaved among the undead like a dancing butterfly, severing their limbs along the way. Her speed was, in fact, comparable to Anderson's, dismembering ten undead in a

matter of seconds.

Gildern on the other hand, was an archer who specialized in one-on-one combat. His attacks had a high penetrating power but were not suited to fight against large groups. In fact, even though his arrows hit his targets, it could not sever their limbs, after a few arrows, he stopped attacking knowing it was futile.

There were only about 50 undead in total. With Lucy and Anderson clearing the undead at such a fast pace, most of the undead were unable to move at all after 15 seconds, lying lifelessly on the floor, tumbling around.

The statue only managed to absorb the energy of 10 undead.

"Hurry, pile up all the undead, we need to burn them!" Link hurried the rest along. They had only prevented the undead from moving, but to fully stop the absorption of power, they needed to burn the undead into charred pieces of flesh.

Anderson, Lucy, and Gildern rushed to move the undead, while Jacker stayed faithfully beside Link in the event of an emergency.

Soon, the undead, with their respective limbs, were piled up into a veritable mountain of corpses.

This whole time, the statue simply looked silently at their attempts to sabotage his power absorption process. Link knew, that the statue had a final trump card he hadn't revealed.

But what exactly was it?

A thought flashed through his mind, he remembered that this place used to be a story map and that this underground statue was a hidden boss.

It was extremely difficult to summon this boss, at least Link never had the chance to fight against it. However, he had read comments on the forum that it took extremely gory and inhumane tactics to summon this hidden boss.

However, this boss was quickly removed from the game due to many players reporting it to be too cruel. Link had a hazy memory of the forum as he did not pay much attention to it while he was reading. He desperately searched his mind for a clearer version of the guide to fight this boss. As his eidetic memory slowly kicked in, the

content became clearer to him, combining his knowledge with the current situation, Link smiled.

Hehe, luckily I still have 20 Omni Points.

He already thought of a plan, but was waiting for the statue's next move to decide whether he would put it into action.

When Link was preparing to ignite the fire, the sinister voice once again reverberated through the cavern.

"What a brilliant Magician, but it is still merely the wisdom of a mortal!"

The statue released a beam of red light onto the pile of undead, causing little white balls of light to float in the air. They then slowly started converging into a brighter and larger sphere of light.

The rest of the squad was at an utter loss for words when this situation unfolded in front of them. Their efforts had been in vain! Link, on the other hand, jumped in excitement.

As expected!

Morpheus' reaction was exactly the same as that of the hidden boss in the game!

Chapter 78

Secret Plot

Link learned one thing from the battle he fought in the game against the boss of the Syndicate – Morpheus was not truly a god, no matter how powerful he seemed. He was just a false-god or a demigod who had stumbled upon a fraction of the mysterious secret knowledge from the realm of the heavens! Even though he had set up his own altar, and even though he possessed a power that seemed infinitely strong to a mortal, he still wouldn't match up to the powers of a true god.

Link noticed something that proved this point. Although Morpheus could control the stone statue from afar, his control was still crude and limited. It might be the perfect ploy to strike terror into people who were unacquainted with magic and spells, but when faced with someone knowledgeable and experienced, his tricks fell like a house of cards.

For instance, Link could sense that Morpheus's grasp of the current situation in the cave was less than perfect. There were many secret moves and tricks that could be easily concealed from him. And that was the perfect window of opportunity for Link to attack him!

Right now, under the control of the red aura from the statue, the white orb was gradually condensing, and its formation was nearing completion.

Once complete, the red aura would guide the white orb into the statue's body, becoming the point from which Morpheus would control the movements of the statue.

Anderson tried to stop this process, but the minute he entered the area shrouded by the red light, his footsteps staggered, and he entered a trance-like state which made him lose control of his movements and tumble straight to the ground. Soon after, there was also a white light on his body that was starting to condense into a white orb.

Anderson almost died of fright, but he managed to muster up all his strength and roll his body out of the zone of the red aura. He'd never dare to go near it again. This showed that the power of a Legendary-level figure, even in its limited and weakest form like the one they were up against now, was still something that a mortal could

never match up to.

"Mr. Link, do something!" shouted Anderson. Link was the only one left that they could rely on.

"Shh! Be quiet," said Link with a thin smile on his face and a finger raised to his lips. While speaking, the tip of his wand glowed slightly, and from the tip a fog-like greyish aura kept flowing out, which then headed towards the heap of corpses.

It was strange how the fog did not face any obstruction this time. It easily floated through the air and into the pile of corpses, effortlessly merging with the white orb.

Ten seconds later, a white orb was then fully formed. And under the red aura's control, it started to penetrate into the statue. At the same time, Link's spell was also complete, he could feel that his grey aura was inside the white orb, entering Morpheus's statue together. And the supposedly godlike Morpheus was completely oblivious to all of this!

When the white orb settled deep inside Morpheus's statue, the black haze around it became extraordinarily thick, and the red shroud of light disappeared. Then, a stony spike about half a foot long materialized in its right hand, and it began to move.

"Hahaha, you mere mortals, I'm tingling in anticipation of your fresh blood! Especially you, Magician!" It was the sinister voice again.

When Link looked over to the statue, a notification popped up.

Morpheus's Elemental Puppet

Level-5 Elite

Specialty: High-level anti-magical properties and immense physical strength.

Battle Skills: Unknown

Status: Weak (not yet activated)

Weakening Spell

Level-2 Spell

Mana Consumption: 32 points.

Effects: Reduces the strength and power of targets by 80% for five minutes.

(Note: The higher the target's level, the lower the weakening effects. Not effective on targets with skills of Level-6 and higher.)

The details of the spell had put Link at ease, because the Elemental Puppet was at Level-5, just within the range of the spell he had just purchased with 20 Omni Points.

The Weakening spell would be able to weaken the strength of a Level-5 Elemental Puppet for about 30%, which was good enough for Link. However, the opponent had anti-magic powers and its body was solid rock, which meant that it would block the powers of magic spells efficiently both inside and outside its body. This would basically render any of Link's spell attacks useless.

The Elemental Puppet was now rushing towards Link and the team. Because its body was rigid and stony, its movements weren't exceedingly fast, but was roughly on par with the speed of a Level-3 Warrior. All the Warriors on the team could match up to its speed.

As a shield-wielder, Jacker rushed forward with his shield raised, ready to block its attack.

"Be careful, it's strong!" warned Link.

His warning made Jacker hesitate for a moment. They had fought together in two battles, so Jacker knew that it was wise to take Link's judgment seriously. And so Jacker changed his tactics and abandoned his plan to charge at the Puppet head-on but opted instead to go into a defensive stance. He gradually slowed down his footsteps and went into a stable stance to defend against the monstrous opponent.

A couple of seconds later, the two collided with each other. Their speeds weren't all that fast, and yet the resulting impact of the collision was frighteningly explosive!

The instant they collided, Jacker raised his shield to cover his face and head, his seven-foot frame was fully covered with steel armor that made him look like a charging tank, while the eight feet tall Elemental Puppet raised its left hand while the other hand attacked Jacker's shield head-on.

The clash between the colossus and the brute rang through the hall in a reverberating boom. It wasn't the volume of the clash that was intimidating though, but the fact that it resonated with everything in the cave – everyone there could feel the vibration in their chest, and even the cave walls shook, causing dust and pebbles to fall from the walls.

But that still wasn't the terrifying part. What was truly disturbing was the strength of the Elemental Puppet!

Jacker was already in a fully defensive stance and was fully bracing himself for the oncoming attack. He was also boosted by the spell Giant's Strength while possessing the power of a Level-5 Warrior himself. Still, when he was hit by the Elemental Puppet's attack, he was hurled backward by one punch!

Yes, he was sent flying, where his whole body was lifted by the force of the impact and then was hurled a few feet backward. Had the monster been fast enough, Jacker would've likely died with that one hit.

When he was in mid-air, Jacker's body was completely numb, he couldn't muster up any energy left to even lift a finger. At the same time, he saw the Elemental Puppet rushing towards him to finish him off.

Luckily, he was not alone.

When he was still in mid-air, Jacker could feel that his body moved backward much faster than it should be, as if there was a powerful force pulling him backward. This slight acceleration had given him time to recover while at the same time saving him from the Elemental Puppet's next attack.

It must be Lord Link's Vector Throw! Jacker was by now very familiar with Link's spell. He recognized that this spell had once saved Lucy's life from the Occult Viktor's attack, and now it had saved his life.

As his body was moving backward, Jacker could feel a cool gas entering the pores of his skin which instantly made him feel better. The numbness he felt receded and he could feel his body was being replenished energy.

It was Link's Elemental Cure!

After unleashing this spell, Link now had an accurate assessment of the Elemental

Puppet's strength.

"Attack it with all your might! Jacker, charge on!" shouted Link.

After hearing this order, the moment Jacker's feet hit the ground, he unhesitatingly charged towards the Elemental Puppet, as if he wasn't the one who had just been hurled backward by the monster's attack just moments ago. He would never doubt any of Link's orders.

Meanwhile, Lucy was close at his heels. She thrust the Gale Sword behind her, creating a wind force to push her forward. Her body was as light as a butterfly and as nimble as a cat, so the resulting force easily propelled her towards the Elemental Puppet at a high speed.

Gildern shot an arrow too, sending an arrow with high penetration power whistling through the air, hitting accurately at the Elemental Puppet's eye.

The only person who proceeded with some reservation was Anderson. The sight of Jacker being completely overpowered by the opponent, was still too fresh in his mind. He dared not follow too closely behind Jacker, in case he was once again hurled backward, which would mean trouble for him if he was right behind him.

The Elemental Puppet seemed slightly nonplussed by the oncoming joint attacks.

"Aha, are you ready to meet your ends, then, mortals?" said the sinister voice.

Just before Jacker and the Elemental Puppet crashed into one another, Link waved his wand at the Elemental Puppet and said, "Weakening!"

"Weakening? You're using a magic spell against me? Magician, have you been struck dumb by the sight of my power?" jeered the Elemental Puppet, after bursting out in laughter. The Elemental Puppet possessed high-level anti-magic powers able to block any kind of attack from mid-level spells.

But Link only responded with a smile on his face.

Chapter 79

Don't Blame Me, I Want to Live

Originally, the Elemental Puppet wanted to finish Jacker in just one hit, but something unexpected happened!

With his original power, he should have been able to destroy this shielded Warrior with ease, but the moment he raised his arms he felt a wave of lethargy overwhelm him. His power was decreasing!

A 30% decrease in power might not seem like much, but to an Elemental puppet with powers comparable to a Level-5 Warrior, 30% might well be the strength he needed to fight against Jacker. If he was not at his full strength, he might not be able to defeat Jacker who was a Level-4 Warrior.

Boom! A familiar sound reverberated through the cave, but the result of this clash was entirely different!

The Elemental Puppet's arm was easily deflected by Jacker and the shield smashed onto the statue's chest with full impact.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The Elemental Puppet was continuously knocked back. He tried to regain his footing by stomping on the ground with his heavy, bulky legs, causing trembles in the cave. There were also fine granules on his chest from the impact with the shield.

Seeing that his attacks were working, Jacker regained his confidence. He knew that Link would definitely be able to deal with this guy!

Jacker rushed forward once again. He pounced on a retreating Morpheus and used his shield to protect himself, bracing for another impact.

However, Jacker was too full of himself this time round. His Warrior instincts wanted to fully humiliate the enemy and he acted too rashly!

The moment Jacker sped towards the enemy, Link knew he had to do something.

The enemy was careless the previous time, but this time, he would already be prepared!

This Elemental Puppet was not an easy opponent, he still had some battle skills up his sleeve. What they needed to do was to weaken the puppet one step at a time. Jacker was way too impulsive!

However, it was too late to stop Jacker now.

"Lucy, use the power of your Gale sword to save Jacker!" Link shouted.

Before he could complete his sentence, the Elemental Puppet raised his leg and stomped on the ground. A low rumble echoed throughout the cave and visible shockwaves emerged on the hard solid ground.

These shockwaves sped towards their target, Jacker. In an instant, Jacker's legs felt numb and incredibly weak. He then stumbled in the direction of the Elemental Puppet.

His inability to keep his balance exposed his head to the enemy. In front of him, the puppet was holding a stone spike in his hand, fully prepared to eliminate him!

Not good!

Jacker's eyes widened, however, he was currently hanging in mid-air and was unable to fully utilize his strength. He could only helplessly watch as he was flung towards the stone spike.

Link cast a spell.

"Vector Throw!"

This was only a Level-1 spell and was not able to change the trajectory of Jacker's Level-5 charging power, but, it still slightly reduced his speed.

"Lucy!" Link hollered. It was too late for him to cast any more spells, the only person that could save Jacker now was Lucy who had already rushed to his side to give support.

Wind element particles spiraled around Lucy's Gale Sword. The moment she made an attack, a gust of wind rushed towards Jacker. Confident that the gust would be enough

to save Jacker, she changed the direction of her attack and made a dash for the puppet's eyes.

The Vector Throw and Lucy's wind element alone could not stop Jacker in his tracks but was still able to change the trajectory of his Battle Charge. Furthermore, Lucy's attack was extremely fast and she managed to reach the puppet's eye before Jacker was hurt. If Morpheus did not defend against Lucy's attack, he would have been pierced by the merciless blade.

At the same time, Gildern shot an arrow as a tag team attack with Lucy. He used a skill called Arrow of Punishment, an attack with unimaginable penetrating power aimed at the Elemental Puppet's weakest joint.

The Elemental Puppet suddenly found himself the target of many powerful attacks. The chemistry between members of The Flamingo Band of Mercenaries was truly something to be feared.

Now that Jacker's trajectory was changed, even if he continued to invest his strength into killing Jacker, his chance of success was low. Moreover, he would be heavily injured. Even with his sturdy exterior, he needed to be careful of this heavy assault.

Left without a choice, the Elemental Puppet shifted his focus away from Jacker.

He used the stone spike in his right hand to defend against Lucy's sword and his right hand to deflect Gildern's arrow. Jacker then flew past the side of the puppet onto the solid ground. Although he looked disheveled, he escaped unscathed.

"Get back on your feet; be calm and listen to me!" Link shouted.

Warriors fought with a burning passion in their hearts. This caused them to become easily agitated and impulsive, robbing them of their ability to make sound decisions in a fight.

There were only a few people in the world that could make calm decisions in the midst of a battle. Those people were termed as geniuses of their fields and clearly, the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries did not possess such a rare ability.

But Link did!

Jacker had a close brush with death. He pounded his numb legs and kicked them back

and forth to circulate the blood flow. After regaining his senses, he stood up.

He would not be impulsive this time. He listened carefully for Link's instructions, while slowly skirting around the Elemental Puppet.

Royal Knight Anderson was in a daze this entire time. Link and his comrades were simply moving at a pace he couldn't keep up with. He started attacking only after the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had fought the puppet for a round.

"Might of a Giant!" Link strengthened Anderson with his spell—he was assuming the role of a supporting spellcaster.

Anderson was also a strong Warrior. While his attacks were not as fast as Lucy and Gildern, he could still deliver heavy, powerful blows to the opponent. Every one of his attacks would be a great threat to the Elemental Puppet and thus, Link was happy to use his Mana points on him.

This spell alone cost him 60 Mana points. On top of the other spells he had cast, he was left with only 20 Mana points and a Mana Recovery Potion in his dimensional pendant.

Link hated the taste of the potion but he uncapped the flask and downed it in one gulp. His Mana points were almost replenished again.

Anderson felt a wave of power surging through him after being strengthened by the Level-3 spell. The Elemental Puppet had to defend against the attacks of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries and had left his neck area open! This was his opportunity to attack! He swung his blade with full force.

Anderson currently held the power of a Level-5 Warrior—the force from this swing was extremely significant. A cut two inches deep could be seen on the puppet's neck.

Through the crack in the puppet's exterior, streaks of light could be seen flowing through its body.

Link was elated. "We just have to land one more blow on his neck to destroy its rune formation!"

Once the rune formation inside the body of an Elemental Puppet was destroyed, it would disintegrate!

Everyone was jolted out of their thoughts; morale was high.

Morpheus was powerful. However, with only two bulky arms here against so many attackers, he was not able to fully defend himself from the all-out assault. The puppet's body was severely damaged and Link and the others' victory was near!

"You, Magician—you have angered me!" It was the voice again, although this time the eeriness had been replaced by boiling rage.

Link originally thought it was just words of anger. However, an ominous premonition suddenly flashed through his mind.

Does he still have something up his sleeve?

Link heard footsteps slowly creeping up on him. He immediately spun around. It was Jacques! He had emerged from the corridor and was only six feet away from him.

Jacques might have just been afraid of staying in the corridor alone. That was Link's exact thought when he first saw him. But when he looked at Jacques again his breath got knocked out of his lungs. Jacques was heading straight for him and his expression was devoid of feelings, even fear. Most importantly, it wasn't until a moment ago when the sound of footsteps became audible.

Not good, this coward has been bewitched, he is on Morpheus' side now! He was transported here directly using the Dimensional Mirror! Link thought.

Jacques was timid, which translated into weak willpower. It was easier for these kinds of people to suffer mental breakdowns and be targets of bewitching spells. At that moment, everyone was concentrating on bringing down the Elemental Puppet while Jacques, a Level-3 Warrior, was prepared to attack Link with his full strength.

There was no time to react!

Jacques had already readied his sword, his Battle Aura enveloping his entire body.

"Don't blame me, I want to live..." he mumbled.

Chapter 80

Absolute Quietude

More than a month ago in Gladstone, Link had once defeated a Level-3 Dark Elf Warrior called Jiggs. But there was a distance between Link and Jiggs, and that gave Link ample time to cast his spells.

Now Link was facing another opponent, Jacques, who was also a Level-3 Warrior. But there was a critical difference.

This time, it was a sneak attack. Jacques had stabbed Link from behind. Link was only aware of it when it was too late. Jacques had also been observing and following Link for quite some time, so he was quite familiar with his magic spells. In short, everything worked to Jacques's advantage!

The sword was aimed at Link's heart from behind and the sword was shrouded in an icy-blue water element Combat Aura. The instant the tip of the sword touched Link's clothes, a biting cold spread to his skin, which Link immediately recognized as Combat Aura.

By then, Jacker, Lucy, and Anderson were all focused on attacking the Elemental Puppet, so none of them had any idea there would be such a twist in events happening right behind them!

At that moment, except for the archer Gildern, none of them had noticed Jacques's betrayal. But even Gildern wouldn't be able to save Link,

Gildern wouldn't have enough time to save Link either because Jacques attacked Link at the right time when he was focused on aiming an arrow at the Elemental Puppet. All he could do was stare helplessly at Jacques stabbing his sword at Link's frail body.

"No!!!" bellowed Gildern.

Gildern's scream had caught the others' attention. Jacker turned around and was completely shattered by what he saw. When Lucy saw it, she completely abandoned the fight against the Elemental Puppet and rushed towards Link to save him.

The damned coward! I should've killed him! thought Anderson, fuming.

He then cast aside the fight against the Elemental Puppet too and rushed to save Link. Princess Annie had ordered him to protect Link's life at all costs. If anything happened to Link, he could just kiss any hopes of an advancement in his career goodbye.

In fact, even if Princess Annie hadn't ordered him to do so, Anderson would still do anything to save Link because he had conceded to the plain fact that without Link, the rest of the team simply had no hope of getting out of this place alive. Link's life must be saved no matter what!

But Lucy and Anderson were too late. Nothing could change the fact that no one could save Link now, he only had himself to rely on in order to survive.

The moment Jacques attacked him, Link knew that he had a very short time to react, probably less than 0.1 seconds. All he could do in that time was cast Level-0 spells. Among all the Level-0 spells he knew, the one that was the most powerful and that had the shortest spellcasting time was Glass Orb.

Using his Matchstick wand, he had decreased the spellcasting time for Glass Orb down to one every 0.04 seconds.

In 0.1 second, I can only unleash two Glass Orbs, which isn't enough to damage Jacques's Combat Aura or even to block his sword attack.

Fortunately, Link's thinking speed was as quick as lightning, so he could analyze the situation in no time. He knew that to survive this attack, the wisest plan wasn't to attack Jacques or to dodge his sword, but to minimize the damage his sword could do as much as possible.

Once he was clear of what to do, Link's wand lit up and 0.04 seconds later, a dim blue orb flew out in a zig-zag trajectory, going around Link's body and hitting Jacques's sword's blade before exploding.

Bang! The Combat Aura on Jacques's sword flickered, counteracting with the fire elements in the Glass Orb. Nonetheless, it was not sufficient to block the Glass Orb's explosion, so the blade of his sword was bent slightly.

An instant later, another glass orb appeared and the bent blade of Jacques's sword bent even further. Because the second attack came right after the first one, the Combat

Aura on the sword did not have time to recover from the first attack yet, so for a short while the strength of Jacques's Combat Aura was halved.

It didn't have any significant long-term effect, though. In truth, a Level-3 Warrior like Jacques didn't even need half a second to restore the lost strength of the Combat Aura caused by the Glass Orbs back to its original level.

But to Link, this half a second of weakness was more than enough.

After the two Glass Orbs, Jacques's sword was blasted and bent by the explosions and was deflected away from the position of Link's heart. But even so, Link could not stop it from stabbing his body.

Link felt something cold on his left abdomen, he looked down and saw that Jacques's sword had stabbed through his body!

Thank goodness, it didn't go through my heart!

Even now, Link still managed to keep his calm. Instead of panicking, he felt relieved. He knew that even though the wound was serious, ultimately it wasn't fatal and that he had a good chance of surviving it.

Link could feel that his stomach had been pierced through. He could also sense a foreign energy in his body – Jacques's Combat Aura. Link knew that this energy would soon explode and once that happened there was no other outcome for him but death.

In this instant, Link manifested what was called a Magician's absolute quietude—a crucial state of mind for Magicians that fortified their mental strength and grit.

Even though he was stabbed, Link's mind was just as clear as before and he managed to stay focused enough that his spellcasting was not affected.

Spellcasting was nothing like physical attacks which worked as long as you could thrust your weapon forward. To cast a spell, you must construct the complicated spell structure and your mental state must be calm and stable. Even minute emotional disturbances would negatively affect spellcasting. Under the extreme conditions that Link was under right now, only a handful of Magicians in the world would be able to cast spells.

And yet Link still managed to do it!

The tip of Link's Fire Crystal staff lit up and 0.2 seconds later, Link successfully cast another spell – Level-1 Vector Protective Force Field.

Then, in the space between him and Jacques, an almost transparent barrier materialized. It gradually expanded until it hit Jacques's body, but because he was a Level-3 Warrior, he was not affected much. Link, however, was sent flying forward.

With a terrifying sound of flesh tearing, Link's body pulled away from the sword's blade just in time before the Combat Aura on Jacques's sword burst into small eruptions. But no matter how small the explosions were, Link was glad he managed to dodge them.

Blood then gushed out of the wound on Link's body. A burning pain spread throughout his body, a pain so unbearable it made Link bend over his waist. Jacques's Combat Aura had done much damage to his internal organs, but luckily, his heart was unharmed.

It was all thanks to the two Glass Orbs that were timely released, otherwise, Link was sure he would've died.

When Link was hurled forward, his wand lit up once more and he cast the Elemental Cure spell on himself. When he landed, he gritted his teeth, swallowed down the pain, and used the aid of Cat's Agility to drag himself as far away from Jacques as possible.

Jacques was about to chase after Link, but he was stunned at how he had escaped as swiftly as the wind. Just as he came back to his senses and was going to step forward with his sword, a violent gust of wind rushed towards him, tossing him a few feet backwards.

It was Lucy.

"Die, you bastard!" she barked, her voice icy and vicious.

Her face was contorted by vengeance and her eyes were filled with bloodthirst. There was not a thread of compassion or mercy left in her. She took advantage of the time Jacques was pushed backwards and charged towards him. Each thrust of her sword was both quick and heavy, accompanied by the loud howling of wind. Jacques was completely overwhelmed and was forced into a defensive stance with no chance to counter Lucy's attacks.

Gildern turned around at the same time and joined Lucy in attacking Jacques. He nocked an arrow and aimed at the joint in Jacques's armor on his leg.

Thwang! Gildern's arrow hit Jacques's left leg right where his skin was exposed!

Link was relieved to see Jacques attacked by two people. He knew he was safe now.

Only then did he allow himself to feel scared. Morpheus's trick had almost cost him his life. Had his reaction been just marginally slower, he would've ended up in the pile of corpses.

I must never underestimate a Legendary opponent, otherwise there'll be a high price to pay! Link would never forget the lesson he learned from this battle.

But he was not a weakling who was there for anyone to push around. Jacques was Morpheus's last trick, and now that he was dealt with, it was time for the decisive battle!

Chapter 81

What a Tenacious Young Man

Link made the correct decision in an instant. He had just escaped from Morpheus' murderous plan but was in no position to be relieved or to even worry about his injury. He swept his gaze across the hall and hollered, "Jacker, Anderson, resume the attack on the Elemental Puppet!"

Everyone had left their original post following his injury, but Link was clear that their greatest threat was still the Elemental Puppet. Jacques was nothing but a chess piece in Morpheus' elaborate plan.

After Link escaped the ambush, Jacques had outlived his usefulness. Morpheus, on the other hand, was a powerful Legendary Magician. Even if only a part of his power was present in the form of a puppet, he was still extremely dangerous if not dealt with in time. It would only take him a matter of seconds to do something unexpected.

The fact that Link was alive and still energetic enough to give commands put Jacker at ease. Although he was fuming with rage and desperately wanted to grind Jacques into minced meat, upon hearing Link's command, he immediately commenced the assault on the puppet.

Anderson also charged forward before exclaiming, "Link is such a tenacious young man! To think that he can still remain conscious after such a serious injury!"

Previously, Anderson did not think highly of Link. This was not because of his suspicions of his magic, but due to Link's tender age and frail physique. He felt that any brandish of the sword would scare the wits out of this young man.

He thus never understood why Princess Annie held Link in such high regard. Link was a genius Magician, but similarly, there were many other genius Magicians in the palace. As the princess, there was no reason to give Link this much support. But now, it all became clear to him.

He was ashamed of himself. If he were to be met with such circumstances, he would definitely have been defeated!

Also, after looking at the way Link responded to the crisis, he was convinced that he would even suffice as an opponent to Link in a battle.

Morpheus, on the other hand, was perplexed. "How can this be possible?"

To think that his ambush was foiled. Even though the opponent was physically damaged, he was still fully conscious.

And as long as a Magician was conscious, his battle prowess would not be affected.

"No wonder this Magician could defeat Andy and Felidia. He wasn't just lucky."

This was not the first time Morpheus met a valuable opponent, however, to be defeated by the same bunch of rookies twice in a day—that was a first.

Absorbed in his thoughts, he momentarily forgot that he was in the heat of battle.

His loss of concentration gave Jacker a chance to charge into the Elemental Puppet with full force. Boom! The puppet sauntered unsteadily backwards from the impact. Anderson immediately followed up with a heavy sword attack, successfully damaging the neck of the puppet and aggravating the previous injury by another two inches.

This swing of his blade also destroyed the rune formation of the Elemental Puppet!

The Elemental Puppet stopped in its tracks and light began spilling out of the cracks in its exterior. The granite on its body began to fall off, signaling that there was a problem with the rune formation that controlled its movement and maintained its form.

After a few violent spasms, the puppet's arms hung lifelessly from its body and the black aura surrounding it completely dissipated. It was now merely an ordinary rock.

Morpheus' Elemental Puppet was now destroyed!

But the disintegration of the puppet continued. This might be due to the heated battle which completely destroyed the integrity of the rocks itself, previously held together only by Morpheus' Legendary power. All that was left in the end was a black crystal the size of a fist.

The black crystal was inconspicuous—other than Link, no one noticed its existence.

They were all more concerned with Jacques' betrayal. His sinister voice had also been completely cut off.

Lucy took advantage of Jacques' foot injury and unleashed a flurry of nine slashes at Jacques' heart. The Gale Sword was light and almost weightless, and on top of Lucy's rage, the insane slashing speed was something Jacques couldn't defend against. It was barely a second before his heart was thoroughly punctured.

After completing her mission, Lucy dashed towards Link and held him in her hands, "My lord, how are you feeling?"

She undressed Link without hesitation to reveal the injury underneath. "My lord, how can it be!" Lucy covered her mouth with her hands, tears flowing out of her eyes.

It was a three-inch-long injury across Link's abdomen. Under the effect of the Battle Aura, the surrounding flesh was also thoroughly destroyed and blood was gushing out of the wound. To a common soldier, this was definitely a lethal wound.

This was also an internal injury and there was no way to stop the bleeding. They could only watch as Link's life slowly slipped away.

"But my lord is only 17 this year!" Lucy sobbed uncontrollably.

Jacker, Anderson and Gildern also fell silent at the sight of the wound.

Their experience was telling them that Link could not be saved.

On the other hand, Link was amused by their reactions, "What's up with all of you? I'm not dead yet. Lucy, this is merely a small wound, stop crying!"

"What?" Lucy looked at Link with puffy eyes. This was merely a small wound? She could not understand.

Link placed his hand gently on his wound and started concentrating Mana. A white light enveloped his hand—this was the precursor to the Level-2 Blizzard spell.

Of course, Link was not planning on using Blizzard on himself, he was simply using this spell to accumulate water element particles.

By maintaining the spell at this precursor state, water elements surged continuously

to the wound and turned into ice. After around 30 seconds, Link removed his hand.

He had frozen the entire wound and even the area surrounding it, effectively stopping the bleeding process. As the tissues and nerves were also frozen, he could barely feel any pain.

Naturally, this was only a temporary measure, with serious side effects on the body. But that would not be a problem. As soon as he returned to River Cove Town, he could be treated with Divine Healing spells. Such wounds were nothing compared to the healing prowess of a priest.

Link stood up and tried walking for a few steps. His abdomen area still felt slightly uncomfortable, but the feeling of his energy constantly being drained due to heavy bleeding was gone.

"Feels good," He smiled at the rest of his squad, "Look, merely a small wound."

He also cast an Elemental Healing spell on himself which would rapidly replenish the blood he had lost. Apart from looking slightly pale, one could tell that Link was fine.

"I could probably last three days in this state," Link said as he smiled. Although he was out of danger, his abdomen area and the organs around it had completely lost its function. He would not be able to ingest any food, though he could replenish his energy simply by casting Elemental Healing on himself again and again.

This was unimaginable on Earth, but in the World of Firuman, anything was possible.

The squad was at a loss for words. Have you ever seen someone who could still joke and move around after being stabbed in the abdomen? Even though they were already used to Link's strange tactics, this was way too amusing.

But they were extremely relieved. Lucy wiped her tears and blushed. She did not expect herself to lose her usual calm demeanor.

"Alright. Let us check if the path is unsealed now that the puppet is defeated," Link laughed.

Almost immediately, Link saw a message from the game system.

Mission: First step Escape.

Player rewarded with 30 Omni Points.

Next Mission: Search for the Cliff of Howling Winds (Uncompleted)

That's 30 more Omni Points in the bag. Link was satisfied.

Chapter 82

Gaining a Noble Ally

Sure enough, the illusion in the passages was gone and the conditions in the cave returned to normal. Finally, it was over.

They all heaved a sigh of relief.

"Should we search for spoils before leaving the cave?" Link suggested.

The mercenaries agreed immediately. They had almost lost their lives fighting in this cave, even Link was stabbed with a sword. How foolish would they be to leave with their hands empty?

Moreover, Link seemed to be in good spirits now and there were no visible signs of fatigue from the serious wound. In fact, he looked much better now. That made the mercenaries less anxious to go back and tend to Link's injuries.

Only Anderson hesitated. He was a Royal Knight of the Norton kingdom. It didn't seem befitting of an honorable Knight to kill men, set fire to the corpses, then rob them of their belongings.

"Are you sure we should be doing that? Maybe we should hurry back to rally the militia," said Anderson. He had to be careful not to tarnish his pride and honor as a member of a noble family and a Knight.

Link himself was the son of a Viscount so he perfectly understood the underlying sentiments that made Anderson reluctant. Even so, he'd much prefer to live and thrive rather than die in the name of idealistic concepts like honor and chivalry!

Still, Link knew that integrity was without its merits. He and Anderson had fought together in this mission, so they were comrades now. He had to find a way to persuade Anderson without making him think that his integrity was in question.

"General Anderson, if we are to call in the militia, then we'd have to divide the share with them as well. Plus, there's no way of keeping a secret when many people are

involved, so words will surely spread out and more people will try to grab a slice of the cake. Ultimately there'd be next to nothing left for everyone. Wouldn't it be best to divide everything amongst just the five of us?" said Link.

Before Anderson could interject, Link continued, "General, before you refuse, why don't you think of your son? You said he's already started his training. I'm sure he wants to become a Knight just like you when he comes of age. But a Knight will need armor, a horse and his own weapons – and none these things come for free. Why don't you stop and consider how much the loot might benefit your son in the future?"

When Link put it this way, Anderson was no longer able to argue with him. Link's words had hit upon the things that had been worrying him lately.

It was true. What good was there in being an honorable Knight if he couldn't secure a good future for his son? At least, with enough gold coins, he could provide his son with some high-quality magical gear.

Ah, what was the point of getting hung up on his own honor? He should be thinking about more practical things like gold coins!

"Let's do it, then!" said Anderson, completely beguiled by Link's sly rhetoric.

Soon after, they began to search for everything inside the Syndicate's lair.

Anderson's movements were still clunky and unsure. He still couldn't completely let go of his ideals as a Knight. The mercenary trio, on the other hand, were professionals in this regard. They swept through the cave like a swarm of locusts, much to the wonder of Anderson who stood staring at them on the side.

Meanwhile, Link didn't help much as he needed to rest. But when the rest of them were preoccupied with the search for booty, he surreptitiously sneaked away into the dark hall in the underbelly of the cave to pick up the black crystal from under a pile of gravel and put it in his storage pendant.

When the others noticed he was gone, they assumed that he was away to examine the Elemental Puppet, so they didn't give it much thought.

Half an hour later, the four of them gathered in the first hall in the Syndicate's lair where they found the cursed Magic Seal.

Lucy began to count and record everything one by one.

"1400 gold coins, 38 steel swords, 30 sets of new leather armor, 3 barrels of 50-year-old aged wine, a pair of gold figurines... The estimated total value should be at least 3500 gold coins."

As expected, the Syndicate was much wealthier than the Dark Brotherhood.

3500 gold coins! Even Anderson couldn't keep himself from gulping in awe at the sheer wealth in front of their eyes. He was a noble Knight who lived in a large manor, and had additional income from the land he owned, yet his annual income had been no more than 150 gold coins. Who would've thought that an underworld organization like the Syndicate would possess such unimaginable wealth! The fact simply boggled his mind.

What a dastardly group of thieves! It seems I must search and clean out more lairs of thieves from now on. The Knight was quickly turned into a sly fox by the irresistible temptation of gold coins.

And now it was time to distribute the loot, which was decided by Link. Anderson had no objections to this. He had seen and understood how Link was the core of the group, and that they had even managed to defeat an evil demon under Link's command. Anderson had recognized the young Magician as a peerless and fearsome man and he was ready to concede to his decisions.

"There are five of us and about 3500 gold coins. The four of us will share 2300 gold coins among ourselves. General, you should get 1000 gold coins out of the share. As for the remaining 200 gold coins, 50 of them should be given to Jacques's family as his pension, and the rest should be divided among the militia. After all, they've made contributions, too. What do you think, General?"

Anderson was speechless. 1000 gold coins were far beyond his expectation! He thought of the contributions each of them made. Link was the brain of the mission, and Jacker was the strongest Warrior who had played a huge role in defeating the Elemental Puppet by restraining the puppet and giving Anderson the perfect opportunity to give it the final blow. All he did was one simple move for him, with no risk at all!

His esteem and position as a Royal Knight had not been the slightest bit useful to the

mission. How could it be of any use when Link had the support of a much more exalted figure like Princess Annie?

He would've been satisfied if the loot was equally distributed, and everyone got about 600 pieces of gold.

"Isn't my share too big?" He had some reservations. He wouldn't mind getting more money, of course, but everyone had risked their lives to get to this point. It would simply be unfair to everyone else and shameless of him to get the lion's share of the loot. They had fought against terrifying opponents together and survived. Deep in Anderson's heart, he had acknowledged Link and the mercenaries as his comrades in arms.

"Don't say that, General," said Link, waving his hand, "You were the one who found the Syndicate's lair, and you were the one who gave the Element Puppet's its last blow. What's more, you are a noble Knight who shoulders a great responsibility of keeping the peace of the kingdom. Your daily expenses would be much bigger than ours and the money would be put to better use if you take it. If you think of us as friends, then please just accept the money."

Link meant everything he said and had no ulterior motives. He valued his friendship with the people who had fought together in battle with him. To him, this relationship was far more precious than a mere few hundred gold coins!

Anderson turned silent for a while. He was utterly swayed by Link's speech.

"Fine, I'll take it," he finally said.

Link's sincerity and generosity had left a deep impression on Anderson's heart. He would remember this act of kindness and the extraordinary young man for the rest of his life.

Not only does this Magician possess powerful magical skills, he also has a good heart and strong integrity. He was even favored by Princess Annie. He will certainly become an important figure in the Norton kingdom in the future. I must maintain my friendship with him.

And that was the most distinct difference between nobles and commoners. Sure, the aristocrats had feelings too. But they never forgot to consider things from a long-term angle and pay more attention to their interests. As a nobleman, Anderson was much

more adept at securing his interests than the mercenaries. After some serious consideration, Anderson decided that becoming Link's ally would be the wisest thing to do right now.

Ever thoughtful, Link took out 200 gold coins from the big pile then put them in a bag and handed it to Anderson.

"General, give this to the militiamen. When we go out later, they will be watching our every move, so we'll divide our share once we're safe from prying eyes in River Cove town."

The 200 gold coins were to keep the militiamen quiet. Although Link was certain that the militiamen knew that there would be much more than 200 gold coins in the Syndicate's lair, if they did not see anything concrete all they could do was suspect. At worse, they would spread some rumors to the public, but that wasn't too much to handle.

The worst thing would be for them to see the entire loot and to know that they only got a small fraction of it. This would surely trigger discontent and resentment, and then more trouble would come from that. Anderson understood how terrible people could become because of gold coins, so he agreed to the plan.

Then, Link pointed his wand at the big pile of loot. Suddenly, magic aura shrouded the treasure. Link walked over to the pile and put the items one by one into the storage pendant under the bright cover of magic aura.

In doing so, although Link couldn't conceal the existence of his storage pendant, still, at least he could conceal the storage gear.

By then Anderson had been accustomed to the sight of Link's magic. Anyway, he was now on Link's side, so the more powerful his ally got and the more tricks he kept hidden from everyone, the better it would be for him.

After some cleaning up, they all finally walked out of the Syndicate's lair.

Once outside, Anderson went straight to the militiamen and addressed them.

"The lair has been cleared, but unfortunately Jacques had perished. I am grieved, but fear not my brothers, I will take care of his family. We've found a few gold coins in the cave, and I'll give some of it to Jacques's family as a pension. As for the rest I'll give it

to all of you!" he said.

After he was done speaking, Anderson summoned the vice-captain and handed him the bag of coins.

"Matt, take this money, and divide it among yourselves," he ordered.

The vice-captain opened the bag and was almost blinded by the glinting gold inside. His hand trembled at the sight. He was only an ordinary soldier whose annual salary was about 15 gold coins. He'd never seen such a dizzying number of gold coins before, and it almost made his knees buckle.

Eventually, each soldier got about one gold coin each. Despite the news of Jacques's death, there was a festive mood in the air.

Some of them were suspicious, and some rumors did spread out, but ultimately nothing came of it. So in the end, Link and the rest successfully smuggled the fortune out of the cove without any incident.

Once they reached the River Cove town, Link invited a priest to heal his own injuries. The Divine Healing spell was indeed potent. Link could even see his wound healing with the naked eye during treatment. The whole process only took a few minutes' time, and it didn't leave any scars on his body.

Still, he dared not envy this power. He knew that many Magicians in history had been trying to study and emulate Divine Healing spells, but they'd all stumbled into dead ends. Link conceded that healing wounds fell under the gods' domain and that it was beyond a Magician's power.

Then Link took out the loot from his storage pendant and handed it to the mercenaries so they could manage it. Then he instructed Gildern to discreetly send 1000 gold coins Anderson.

Anderson took the hint. He gave the mercenaries a guarantee that he would station himself in the River Cove town to cleanse the Girvent Forest of brigands and bandits, and that if the need ever arose, he was always there to help!

Thus, the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had gained a noble ally.

It was late in the night when everything was settled. Alone in his room, Link sat up in

his bed and examined the black crystal that had been on the Elemental Puppet.

Chapter 83

The Universal Crystal

The black crystal was the size of a fist; one would think that it was the shape of a sphere from afar. However, closer inspection revealed that it's in fact a multi-sided object, similar to a soccer ball. It was translucent just like amber. Link peered through the crystal and observed the flickering candle flames.

It looked like a crystal that you could just buy off the shelves of a shop. The only thing out of the ordinary was the slight dark energy emanating from the crystal every now and then.

This energy was very vague, if not for Link's sensitivity to magic and his close proximity to the crystal, he would not have been able to detect it. After a moment, an in-game message appeared.

Mid-Level Domingo Crystal (Universal Crystal)

Quality: Flawless

Level-5

Effect: Used to store all sorts of energy, Elemental, Divine, Mana etc.

Current State: Dark energy (25% filled).

Upon reading the message, Link could not control his excitement.

The Domingo Crystal was a special crystal body created by the genius Alchemist Domingo more than 1000 years ago. It had great versatility in its uses and the creation process was extremely complex. It was thus highly valued and could be sold for a high price. Link estimated that this Domingo crystal in his hand could be sold for 8000 gold coins, despite only being at Level-5.

I would be rich!

The Domingo Crystal was very useful to a Magician.

Take Link as an example, the fastest speed in which he could cast the Glass Orb spell was 0.04 seconds. In this time, Link only spent 0.01 second constructing the spell structure while the remaining 0.03 seconds was used to accumulate elemental energy.

The same could be said for the Whistle. In the 0.2 seconds needed to cast the spell, at least 0.15 seconds would be used to accumulate elemental energy.

However, with this Domingo Crystal, Link could store elemental energy within it. If he stored fire elemental energy, he would not be required to accumulate energy before releasing the spell. He would shorten the time needed to cast the Glass Orb from 0.04 seconds to just slightly more than 0.01 seconds, and the Whistle to just 0.05 seconds. He might even be able to cast Level-3 and Level-4 spells within 1 second.

That was not all. If Mana was stored instead, Link's Maximum Mana could exponentially increase and solve his Mana shortage problem altogether!

The Domingo Crystal was indeed a dream come true for many Magicians!

However, this crystal could not be fully utilized now as it still contained the dark energy that Morpheus stored. He had to find a way to purify it.

Find a priest? That was Link's initial thought. When he was playing the game, he had occasionally found some of these Domingo Crystals laced with dark energy as loot. His standard practice was to purchase dispelling services from a priest.

However, that was in-game. In reality, bringing such a rare treasure to the priest would create waves in River Cove Town. What if they became targets of assault because of this crystal?

This was the difference between games and reality. Games were blessed with an unending amount of resources and developers would fiercely protect the players' rights. Items were simply pixels and codes that could be rewritten and added.

But in the World of Firuman, resources were scarce, especially spellcasting materials. They could be sold for a high price everywhere.

Link hence rejected this idea immediately.

Then I guess we can only use that method, although it would take a long time, there is no risk involved.

In the game, some Magicians did not feel that it was worth spending their gold coins on dispelling services, nor did they have alchemy labs they could use to purify the crystal. They then thought of a method called the Torrent Purifying Method.

The Magician would place the Domingo Crystal into a running stream or any type of flowing water, and under the influence of water elementals, the dark energy in the Domingo Crystal would slowly be released. The Domingo Crystal in Link's hand was at Level-5, meaning that it contained at least a Level-5 dark magic. This level of contamination required one month of purification. Seeing that it was only 25% filled, around ten days would be sufficient.

However, there was a problem with this method. Releasing dark energy into the river was no different from polluting the river with deadly poison. Level-5 dark energy was extremely dangerous. In terms of the fire element, a Level-5 fire elemental spell had the destructive force of fuel-air explosives!

If dark energy was indeed released into the river, all life in the river would be contaminated. Anyone who drank from the river would also fall ill.

In essence, it was an immoral act.

When Link was playing the game, he had once accepted a mission, "Punish the Shameless Magician!" This Magician in question did exactly the thing Link was thinking of, polluting the river and destroying the livelihood of a village downstream. It was an act that was frowned upon.

Link could not bring himself to do such a thing. He had to make amendments to the method.

As it was getting late and Link needed ample rest to recover from his injury, he kept the Domingo Crystal and cast an Elemental Healing spell on himself before turning in for the night.

It was a silent and peaceful night.

The next morning, Link was almost fully recovered due to the constant Elemental Healing and ample rest he got. He felt energetic and even a little too well fed.

After breakfast, Jacker, Lucy and Gildern continued sorting out their spoils while Link stayed in the attic above his room. The attic was made entirely of stone, with the exception of the roof, which was made of glass. When the sun shined through the attic, it would be brilliantly illuminated.

Link started casting some spells. He used enchanting magic; a shaping spell that created a large water vat connected to the ground. The opening of the water vat directly faced the glass roof, in fact, it would be more accurate to say that it was connected to the glass roof as well. It was impossible to see the insides of the water vat when you were in the building.

Link then filled the vat with clear water.

The vat was huge and cylindrical in shape. It was almost 4.5 feet tall and 6 feet wide. It took nearly five tons of water before it was fully filled. If not for his enchanting magic which strengthened the sturdiness of the attic's structure, it might have already collapsed.

Link then placed the Domingo Crystal into the vat. He was now prepared to execute the final step.

He climbed to the roof and cast the shaping spell on the attic's glass roofs, melding the glass into its surroundings. This way, it was impossible to open the roof through normal means, preventing anyone from stealing his crystal.

He then started changing the internal structure of the glass itself, even going so far as to rearrange the particles to create a complex and intricate refraction structure.

No matter which angle the sunlight hit the glass roof, it would be focused by this refraction structure to shine directly onto the Domingo Crystal.

Sunlight was the world's mightiest source of light energy, with the power to curb all forms of darkness. By focusing the sun rays onto the Domingo crystal, the dark energy within would slowly be purified. Not only would this ensure the consistent and safe purification of the crystal, it would also not be detected by the outside world.

Following which, Link created another window and refocused its sunrays to the vat as well. This was to ensure the stability of the purification process even on days where the sunlight was not strong.

The Domingo crystal would first release dark energy into the clear water and would only start spilling out of the vat when the water reached its threshold.

Link was thus not worried about nightfall as the Domingo Crystal would not be able to release that much dark energy in a night.

The Girvent Forest was blessed with good weather today, with strong sunlight and a cool breeze. Standing in the attic, Link calculated the time needed to purify the Domingo Crystal.

It would probably take around a month for my Domingo Crystal to be fully purified, Link smiled at the thought.

Even though it was going to take a long time, it was carried out in a secretive and safe environment.

When he left the attic, he transformed the door into a concrete wall.

Jacker and the others would probably not go to the attic. Completely sealing the attic off would reduce the chance of the crystal getting discovered.

It was not that Link didn't have faith in his comrades, but he generally felt that the less they knew about magic, the better it would be for them.

It was noon by the time Link was done.

Jacker and the others had returned from their morning sale. Their loot fetched a grand total of 2500 gold coins in the River Cove Town black market. It was an extremely good deal; everyone was all smiles during lunch.

Link was happy that everyone was in a good mood.

After the meal, Link took out the letter he found in the Syndicate's hideout.

"This was the letter taken from the black-robed Magician who ambushed us when we were at the Red Leaves Cove. Apparently, it was a message for his friend. It mentioned that the black-robed Magician was a Dark Elf who went by the name Felidia, and his friend lived in a place known as the Cliff of Howling Winds. Anyone recognize this place?"

Everyone searched their memories before shaking their heads.

Jacker broke the silence, "There are some new faces in town recently. I heard that some are soldiers from the north habitat and traveling poets from the South, maybe they have heard of this place. I'll go ask around later."

"That's good," Link nodded, before continuing, "From tomorrow onwards, I will be going to the East Cove Higher Magic Academy to study magic, and we probably will not see much of each other. If there is anything important, ask Lucy to write to me. Also, Jacker and Gildern, both of you have to start learning how to read. The only one who can read and write here is Lucy, and that is why she is the housekeeper of the Mercenary Band."

"Okay," Jacker and Gildern begrudgingly agreed.

"As for the gold coins, I only need my tuition fees and 100 gold coins as my living expenses. I will leave the remaining 4000 gold coins here."

"My lord..." Lucy wanted to object.

"Let me finish," Link stopped Lucy from completing her sentence, "I don't really need a lot of money at the Academy. Currently, we have quite a bit of fame in River Cove Town, and Jacker is already a Level-4 Warrior. I guess it is time for us to recruit more members to strengthen our Mercenary Band. Make use of our connection with General Anderson too."

The three of them fell silent. Forming a Mercenary Band had always been their dream, and now the conditions were ripe.

Chapter 84

A New Apprentice in the East Cove Magic Academy

Jacker went out in the afternoon to sniff around the Cliff of Howling Winds. He wasn't out for long, though, and was back an hour later.

"My lord, no one has ever heard of this place, but a bard told me there's a place that fits the description of the name. The place is more than a hundred miles north of the Girvent Forest," informed Jacker. Vague clues were the only thing he managed to obtain.

"In that case," said Link after some consideration, "We should hire someone to investigate this place. If there's any news, contact me."

"Yes, my lord," answered Jacker.

Link had been packing and Lucy was helping him by his side. She was usually a very capable woman, but she took her time with the chore this time. She was anxious about Link so much that she would follow Link to the East Cove Magic Academy if she could.

Link was at once moved and annoyed by her. Finally in a state of confusion and weariness, he stuffed everything into his storage pendant - towels, blankets, clothes, and even some of his favorite snacks that Lucy had prepared for him. There was almost no space left in his storage pendant when he was done.

The next morning, Link got into a hired carriage and went to the East Cove Magic Academy alone. He was silent all the way there.

More than an hour later, he reached the front gates of the East Cove Magic Academy. The same gatekeeper Vincent was there, still basking in sun in the garden. He spoke to Link the moment he saw him get down from the carriage.

"Boy, I thought I'd never see you again in my life. Who would've thought that you would manage to get into the academy?" he said, laughing.

Link might have gained some fame and prestige in the River Cove town, but the East

Cove Magic Academy was an ivory tower filled with powerful Magicians who were the cream of the crop even among Magicians in the kingdom. Unsurprisingly, they took no notice of the lives of common folks, so Link's fame had not reached the gates of the East Cove Magic Academy.

Moreover, the effects of Herrera's Camouflage Feathers concealed most of Link's true potential, so in the eyes of Vincent, Link was still the poor teenaged boy whose innate talents in magic were pitifully low.

Link, of course, took none of Vincent's derision to heart. He took a Magician's bow before Vincent, then smiled and said, "Yes, I can't believe my own luck myself. I'm going inside now, Mr. Vincent."

"Go ahead. Don't waste your good fortune." Vincent nodded at the young man as he went into the academy. Although his talents were poor, he was very humble, so Vincent decided to treat him as another ordinary Magician's apprentice.

He'd seen almost a thousand students like that every year.

Link walked passed the academy gates where he encountered a small flat path. He walked along the path for a few hundred feet when then turned a corner. He was unprepared for the view that emerged once he took the turn.

In front him, a vast valley stretched across the horizon.

Golden rays of sunshine shone down from the heavens like waterfalls made of light, a spacious, flat ground in the middle of the valley. On the flat ground, there were Mage Towers with blue roofs so tall they seemed to touch the sky. At the top of the towers, there were countless brilliantly shining magic runes flowing around the towers. Threads of elements flowed in the air, crisscrossing each other and making it look like the towers were connected by a magical spider's web. Flowers and trees dotted the space between the towers while a creek meandered around the academy, its surface glinting in the sun.

What a glorious view of the capital of magic where the best Magicians gathered!

It's a beautiful place now, but it may not be long before all that is left is rubble.

Link felt both awe for the splendor that stood before him and grief for what would be lost.

Although he now had the Occultic Runes with him, thus undermining the first steps of the Dark Elves' plan, but as long as some of them were still alive, they would never give in until they'd thought of a way to release the demon Tarviss.

What would their next step be? Link could only make wild guesses for now. What he must focus on at present was to constantly improve himself before the disaster, so he would not stand helplessly aside when the time came.

There was a huge square near the cove entrance where people rushed about to and fro. They were all Magicians and they all look hurried, as though in a race against time.

An impressive statue of a Magician stood proudly in the middle of the square.

Link went over and looked at the nameplate at the bottom of the statue, which read, The founder and the first dean of the East Cove Magic Academy, the Level-8 Master Magician, Ambron.

Beneath it, there was a quote from the dean.

Two things are essential in the quest to advance your magic skills: first, to strive for the truth and second, to strive for the power to defend the truth!

That's a wise old man. Link could not help but nod in agreement with the statement.

Once he'd crossed the square, Link took out the map with directions that Herrera had given him.

From the square, take the widest path, go all the way to the third tower on the left, where there's a statue of a hound at the door...Ah, there it is.

Bale was a Level-6 Magician and he was a respected figure in the academy. He was one of the core academic council members and his Mage Tower was significantly taller than the rest. Even the decoration and furnishing inside was much more refined and luxurious than the others.

He walked up to the door then summoned a Magic Mirror – a little trick he learned when he was bored. He checked himself in the mirror and made sure everything was in order, then gently knocked on the door.

After a while, a young Magician answered the door. He looked to be about 30 years

old. Moments later, a notification about him appeared on the interface.

Derek

Level-2 Average Magician

Status: The Magician Bale's apprentice and assistant.

The message was brief and didn't say anything about the spells that Derek had mastered, but it was already enough information for Link.

Derek stared at the unremarkable youth standing at the door and sensed that the Mana on his body was pitifully low. Derek couldn't help but frown at the sight.

That morning, his tutor Bale had told him that a new student would be coming today and instructed him to welcome him on his behalf. Derek had thought it was just another trivial chore. But the minute he saw this lanky young man when he opened the door, Derek was swept over by a sense of disdain.

So here comes another imbecile who got in through the back door.

Derek was not good at hiding his emotions but he realized that although this young man was completely worthless and inept, he was still invited to the Mage Tower by the Magician Bale himself. Derek was sure this young man must have strategic connections in high places, so it's best not to offend him too much.

"So you're Link?" asked Derek in a frosty tone and with a frown on his face.

"Yes, that's me." Link noticed the contempt in Derek's eyes, but he thought nothing of it. He was here to learn magic while keeping an eye on Bale. Everything else was trivial and unworthy of his attention.

"Did you bring your recommendation letter?" asked Derek

"Of course." Link handed over the letter that Herrera gave him. It was written by Princess Annie on behalf of the royal family of Abel, no doubt carrying immense weight and stature within it.

Derek took the envelope and saw the roaring lion seal printed on it, which got him even more irritated.

What a lucky kid. He doesn't seem to have any talent and yet he managed to ride on the coattails of the royal family.

"Come in." Derek's tone had gotten even colder now.

Link followed Derek into the hall on the first floor. It was a spacious hall with an abundance of light streaming in from the outside. There were many tables and chairs teeming with young people. There was, all-in-all, about 30 people in the hall.

Some of them had their noses stuck in books, some were in quiet contemplation, and others were experimenting with magic. At the corner of the hall there was a large, semi-circular bookcase filled with at least 300 books.

On the other side of the hall, there was a small wine bar with a bartender tending to it. A few young people were drinking there while softly chatting. The scene called to mind the ambiance of a tavern. Yet when Link overheard parts of their conversations, he found out that they were discussing magic.

What a rich learning atmosphere, thought Link.

He carefully sensed the Mana of everyone around him and found that most of them were at least mid-level Magician's Apprentices. In fact, some of them were just a step away from becoming a full-fledged Magicians.

The level here is much higher than Flemmings Academy.

Derek led Link to a table at the far corner of the hall. He then explained, "This is your table. You're now a beginner apprentice. You're allowed to listen when a tutor is giving a lecture, but you're not allowed to ask any questions, let alone disrupt the class. Understood?"

In other words, Link only had the right to participate but no right to speak because his magic talents were too low. The questions he asked would only waste the other students' time.

Link was happy with what he got, though. It was good enough for him just to be able to get into the academy.

"I understand," replied Link.

"Good. Follow me, I'll take you to your room."

Derek walked towards the corner of the hall while Link hurried to keep up. Eventually, the two stopped at a narrow door below the spiral staircase in the hall.

"This is your room," said Derek.

It was originally a small storage room that was deemed unfit to turn into an apprentice's room. But because the tutor had suddenly received a new member into the Mage Tower when all the rooms were occupied, they had to make do.

Derek could sense from the tutor's tone and attitude that he did not care much about this new apprentice but had no choice but to make the necessary arrangements because it was an order from the dean. So Derek took the initiative and arranged Link to stay in the small room.

Derek opened the door, revealing a space of less than fifty square feet. There was a small bed with a nightstand instead of a table, and a small window in the corner. Despite the size, the room was spotlessly clean.

There was only magic on Link's mind, he was not concerned about the external living conditions at all. Otherwise, he would not have been able to stay in the River Cove inn attic for a month. And so all he did was nod his head and brought his luggage into the room.

Link didn't seem to have much baggage, all he had were some books and few changes of clothes. He placed everything onto the nightstand by the bed.

Derek was still standing in the doorway and saw that Link was done setting his things down.

"One last thing. You need to do some routine work as a Magician's Apprentice. What spells do you know?" asked Derek.

"I know Earth Spike," answered Link. Herrera had reminded him earlier that he should maintain his identity as a beginner Magician's Apprentice.

"Earth Spike? Good." Derek turned to an apprentice in the hall and shouted, "Warwick, get me some blank scrolls!"

Soon afterwards, an apprentice called Warwick appeared with a handful of scrolls. He glanced sympathetically at Link who was in the room as he handed the scrolls to Derek.

What an unlucky guy. Not only did he get the worst room in the Mage Tower, he's also in charge of such a menial and tedious chore as creating magic scrolls!

Derek sent Warwick away, and used the Magician's Hand to place the stack of scrolls on the nightstand.

"I've heard that you've been studying at another magic academy before, so you must have the basic skills in preparing magic scrolls, haven't you?"

"Yes," answered Link.

Preparing magic scrolls was the most basic skill in the field of enchantment. As for Link's skill level in enchantment, he was sure that he could rival even the Level-6 Magician Bale, so he had no problem at all in preparing magic scrolls. In fact, before going into the Syndicate's lair, he had even prepared 20 magic scrolls himself.

But of course he couldn't display his true powers in Bale's Mage Tower. Link had even hidden his Matchstick wand away and would now only use a simple ordinary white wooden wand that he made himself.

"Good," said Derek, "Now take these scrolls and make sure you prepare at least three Earth Spike magic scrolls a day. You'll only be allowed two extra blank scrolls if you run out because you've produced defects. If you need more than that, you'll have to pay for it and one blank scroll costs 3 silver coins. But if you manage to produce perfectly functioning magic scrolls, you'll be paid a silver coin for each. You can get more silver ink and quill pens from Warwick, the Magician you just met just now. Any questions?"

This is ridiculous, thought Link. A Level-0 magic scroll would sell for at least 6 silver coins, and the cost of producing it should not exceed 2 silver coins! Not only am I being cheated by getting paid only one silver coin per scroll, I'd even have to pay 3 silver coins for each damaged scroll, when in fact these ordinary blank scrolls shouldn't cost any more than 50 coppers! No wonder every famous Magician in the game were all wealthy. Turns out they'd all been exploiting the apprentices' hard labor!

It was true that this was unfair to Magician's apprentices. Since the Magicians were

shameless enough to take advantage of the powerless and the apprentices were themselves willing and even glad to be taken advantage of, nothing was ever done about it.

Link thought this was probably one of the important sources of income for a Mage Tower. In the future, he would certainly have his own tower and his own apprentices as well, so this was a lesson for him about how he would manage it in the future.

"I understand," answered Link.

"Good, get to work then." Derek walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Finally, Link was alone in the quiet room. He sat on the bed and took a long breath.

Then, a notification flashed on the interface.

Mission: Enrolment completed.

Player rewarded with 5 Omni Points.

This was a mission that he had received when he first arrived at Girvent Forest, which seemed to happen so long ago. It had taken him quite a while to complete this mission.

Mission: Upgrade.

Mission Details: Master a Level-1 spell and become a full-fledged Magician.

Mission Rewards: 15 Omni Points.

Link had long mastered a Level-1 spell. He'd even modified it with Supreme Magical Skills and created his own spell, Whistle, so as soon as the notification appeared he had already completed it.

As a result, Link was rewarded with 20 Omni Points. Coupled with the 30 Omni Points he got from the mission of escaping the Syndicate's lair, he currently had a total of 50 Omni Points.

Another month and a half and the Ailing Mana effects will be over. I must save these points so I can purchase a high-level spell when my Mana is fully restored!

Then, another notification appeared.

Mission: Upgrade.

Mission Details: Master a Level-2 spell and become a Level-2 Magician.

Mission Rewards: 25 Omni Points.

This mission had also been completed, because Link had mastered a Level-2 defensive spell – Guarding Barrier. So Link's Omni Points were now at 75 points.

Then, another notification popped up. Link glanced over and found that it was another upgrade mission.

Mission: Upgrade.

Mission Details: Master a Level-3 spell and become a Level-3 Magician.

Mission Rewards: 40 Omni Points.

Good, this is a mission I can concentrate on for now, Link thought.

So Link now had three active missions that he must complete. The first was to upgrade his level, the second was to investigate the Magician Bale, and the third was to locate the Cliff of Howling Winds.

My hands are full with all these missions! Link sighed, then pulled out a blank scroll and started to prepare an Earth Spike.

Chapter 85

The Mage Tower's Economic Operation

In the blink of an eye, two weeks had passed.

Link was sitting in the corner of the hall listening intently to a lecture by a Level-4 Magician on the technique of magic control. Much of this knowledge could not be found in the books that he read and thus were extremely valuable. Link was inspired.

He did not want to miss a single detail.

This Magician went by the name of Darris. He was Bale's chief disciple and was a very high level. As Bale was usually busy, most of the time classes would be lectured by him instead.

As a Level-4 Magician, he was the strongest Magician an apprentice could hope to meet at the Level-1 hall.

Link listened while comparing to his own spellcasting experience, and found things that he could improve on.

After the lesson, many of the apprentices rushed forward to bring up the burning questions they had. Link listened to some of them and could not help himself from chuckling.

These were some very basic and simple theories—to think that the apprentices in this academy could not figure them out.

He shook his head and headed back to his room to write some magic scrolls.

On the podium, Darris was extremely patient and answered every one of the apprentice's questions with a gentle smile on his face.

At the corner of his eye, he noticed a calm and almost nonchalant Link sitting at the side of the hall. He did not seem to have the passion that the other apprentices had for magic.

What a strange person. As Bale's chief disciple, Darris knew of Link's existence, although he did not get much information either. He simply knew that his teacher received a letter from an old friend and subsequently agreed to take this "talentless and taciturn" young man under the watch of his Mage Tower.

Magic requires a conversation to generate sparks. What good does it do if he just leaves after listening every lesson? Darris was perplexed. However, he was tied up right now and decided that he would find a time to talk to this young man later.

Link, on the other hand, was unaware that he had been noticed by Darris. After going back to his room, he sat on the little stool in front of his bed and took out the low-level scrolls, silver ink, and rune brush, laying them in front of him. He took a look at the blank scroll and adjusted his concentration to be fully on the task before starting to write the Earth Spike spell.

During the process, a complete image of the Earth Spike spell formed in Link's mind. He penned every stroke with an extremely clear mind.

When Link was completely focused, the rune images in his mind seemed to slowly materialize in front of his eyes. Under his control, this image would then project itself onto the blank scroll.

Following which, Link only had to trace the rune images he saw and complete the scroll easily. In about five minutes, Link placed the last stroke on the blank scroll.

The whole process was smooth and natural, with confident strokes and no pauses in between. The Mana surging through the strokes was tranquil and the completed product was enveloped in a warm trickling light of Mana.

As usual, it was a success!

Now, as long as the user didn't erase the activating rune from the scroll, the Earth Spike spell stored within would be activated. This was true even for ordinary people without any abilities.

This convenience was what created a market for magic scrolls.

It was the easiest way for a Magician to earn his keep.

Link was tasked with completing three magic scrolls every day. From his observations

these past two weeks, an ordinary apprentice would take around one to two hours to complete a Level-0 magic scroll. If he was unlucky and failed in one or two scrolls, the whole process of writing three magic scrolls could take seven to eight hours.

Hence, for an ordinary apprentice, three magic scrolls per day was an extremely tiring task—Link did not even break a sweat. Link continued with the production process and wrote nine magic scrolls within an hour. Only then did he start feeling lethargic.

He only had to give three magic scrolls out of the nine, meaning that he could keep the remaining six for himself. Link was taking advantage of the two free empty scrolls per success given by Derek.

This was a great chance for Link to stock up some magic scrolls for sale.

Link then started reading a book. Naturally, this was not just any other basic magic book, but one he borrowed from Herrera called *The Magician's Armor*. It offered an in-depth discussion of defensive magic.

After Jacques' ambush, Link had been focusing his research on defensive magic so as to create armor for self-protection.

However, he was unable to conduct experiments as he did not want to attract Bale's unwanted attention.

After an hour of reading, Link was struck by an idea. He immediately took out his thesis and expanded on his current idea.

Link was well aware of the difficulty of his thesis, which discussed the nature of space itself. He did not expect to complete this thesis by himself, but he did not feel like giving up either.

As he delved deeper into this topic, the progress of his thesis became exponentially slower, but there would come a day where he would finally reach his goal.

Two hours passed since Link immersed himself into writing his thesis. Link grabbed his books and magic scrolls and headed out to hand his magic scrolls to Warwick.

Link now had a rough idea of how interpersonal relationships worked in the Mage Tower.

Every apprentice in the tower would take up an extra role other than studying magic. Some would help in brewing basic potions, some with enchanting and others with the writing of magic scrolls.

Warwick was in charge of the magic scroll branch and Derek was, overall, in charge of low-level magic items.

The magic items created would then be sold. Naturally, most of the income would go to Bale, but a substantial amount would also be given to the apprentices. This was one way apprentices could earn a stable income while studying in the Mage Tower.

When Link appeared, Warwick greeted him with a smile, "Done in less than five hours? That's pretty fast, Link."

Warwick received the scrolls with glee and made a special marking on the scrolls that Link made. As one of the strongest apprentices, Warwick was currently learning Level-1 fire elemental magic. If he succeeded, he would be considered an official Magician.

He was considered a genius based on his current achievements and had an eye for good quality magic items. The scrolls submitted to him were all successful, but he realized that even within these scrolls, they would be marked with a difference in quality.

Link's magic scrolls would almost always end up in the batch of highest quality scrolls. The scrolls he wrote were of extremely good quality, with stable output and 20% stronger magic power.

And to their largest group of customers, the mercenaries, a strong and stable magic scroll was well worth the few extra silver coins they had to pay. After all, this scroll could save their lives in times of need!

Link's scroll could be sold for eight silver coins, while Warwick only had to give six silver coins to Derek for every magic scroll sold. The remaining two silver coins were naturally pocketed by him.

Most low-level Magicians were in need of money. As Link could bring him extra income, Warwick was especially nice to him and overlooked certain strange occurrences, such as the fact that Link always needed to consume three blank scrolls before he could create a successful one, despite the quality of his scrolls.

Link also knew of the situation on the ground. However, this was a mutually beneficial situation where both Warwick and himself would earn extra income. It was a pleasant cooperation.

Who would complain of having too much money anyway?

"This scroll took me around one hour, how can that be considered fast," Link laughed and started walking off. He needed to discuss his reflections for the day with Eliard.

Darris was wrong about Link. It was not true that Link didn't like to converse with others, but that he was unwilling to converse with the apprentices in the Mage Tower. Only by talking to exceptional geniuses like Eliard would he truly benefit.

"Hey, wait a minute," Warwick stopped him.

"Is there a problem?" Link asked.

Warwick looked around before whispering, "Do you want to earn even more?"

"Of course," Link nodded. He was interested in what Warwick wanted to say.

"Then I recommend that you learn Lesser Armor and Lesser Sharpness. They are both Level-0 support spells and a high-quality support magic scroll can sell for a maximum of 12 silver coins (1.2 gold coins). As you know, we only have to give six silver coins to Derek...we can split the remaining between us."

Warwick was extremely clear. Link was bought over immediately and nodded, "They are two simple spells, I will master them as soon as possible."

To mercenaries, an attacking spell was merely a spontaneous burst of energy and would rarely change the tide of a battle. It was true that supporting spells that could enhance their capabilities for an extended period of time would be more practical.

Link would be happy with whatever percentage of the money he got. Anyway, his main source of income would be from the extra scrolls he would be making.

"I have high expectations." Warwick was confident of Link. He knew that some people had been looking down on this taciturn young Magician, but he had a feeling that Link was not someone to be trifled with.

Link nodded and headed towards the academy plaza.

Eliard should already be there waiting for him.

Chapter 86

What a Pity!

There were two squares within the gates of the East Cove Magic Academy. The one near the entrance was called the Square of Glory, while the other one was a small courtyard inside the academy called Bryant's Inspiration Courtyard.

Who was Bryant?

As the only Magician who rose to Legendary level for nearly a thousand years, Bryant was a household name in the Norton kingdom. Within the Magicians' circle, he was also known as the "Child of the Apocalypse".

It was said that this courtyard was where he received the inspiration that would later lead to his upgrade to the Legendary level. A century later, the East Cove Magic Academy was built on this valley, and as a tribute to the Master Magician Bryant. This piece of land was preserved and turned into a courtyard.

Rumors had it that once a Magician got Bryant's blessings, they would then receive inspiration from the unrivaled Legendary Magician which would help them break through their current level and reach a higher one. There was, of course, no truth to this hearsay, and no Magician actually took it seriously.

However, only Link knew that this so-called Inspiration Courtyard should be called the Seal Courtyard instead, because deep under the grounds of the courtyard was exactly where the demon Tarviss was sealed!

With very few exceptions, no one in the entire academy knew about it.

The events that led up to the capture and confinement of the demon Tarviss happened hundreds of years ago. The horror of the past had faded through the ravaging tooth of time. Nowadays, the courtyard was a nice little place with a meticulously trimmed garden, surrounded by woods and streams. In fact, it was now the Magicians' favorite place to take leisurely walks whenever they needed a break or had time on their hands.

Link and Eliard had agreed to meet here.

Link walked past lush green grounds, went around the Enchanted Fountain Garden, and finally to the willow grove by the stream. From afar he could see Eliard who was under the willow trees.

There were tables and chairs under the shade of the trees. Link walked over and saw Eliard engrossed a magic textbook.

"Hey, you're early today," said Link, who then sat down on the chair opposite of Eliard. He reached for a round wooden box on the table, opened the lid, and was immediately hit by an appetizing aroma of food that wafted out of it.

"Wow...sea bass soup, soft wheat bread, mushrooms and bacon...what a feast! Tsk tsk, Eliard, you lucky bastard; the best cook in the world is in your Mage Tower!"

Link tore into the piece of bread. It was both fragrant and soft, and it even had a savory seasoned buttery filling inside – it was just a piece of bread, yet it was irresistibly delectable!

This was all thanks to Herrera, the Angel of Light, otherwise known as the tutor Moira, who put particular emphasis on the quality of life of her apprentices. She employed the best chef in the academy in her Mage Tower. The apprentices in her Mage Tower only had to pay a small fee and the cook would prepare a scrumptious meal for them.

Whenever Eliard came, he would bring along some food with him to share it with Link.

Eliard put down the magic book, smiled and said, "Food can only bring joy to the body. The only thing that can enrich and delight the soul is magic."

"I wouldn't mind indulging in these earthly luxuries though," replied Link with a laugh.

Link finished his bread, wiped his hand, then flipped through the textbook in Eliard's hand. It was a book that he'd read before, titled Progress in Magic.

"So you've started to learn Level-1 spells, Eliard?" asked Link, slightly surprised.

"Yeah, I've recently just started to dive into it," Eliard nodded.

Link could not help but marvel at the revelation. Eliard really deserved to be called a

peerless genius. A month ago, he was still a beginner in magic who had absolutely no skill or knowledge. But now, he had advanced so quickly to Level-1 spells. Link couldn't imagine how shocked the other apprentices in the academy would be if they found out.

Any Magician's Apprentice who could begin to learn Level-1 spells within six months would already be deemed a genius. But in a mere month, Eliard could achieve what most other geniuses would need half a year to accomplish – this was irrefutable proof of his formidable talents!

"Eliard, that's amazing!" Link was genuinely impressed. Link knew that the only reason he himself could make progress so quickly was because of the help from the Lord of Light. Eliard, on the other hand, was a pure and unadulterated genius!

"You're mocking me," said Eliard jokingly while looking at Link with a wry smile. "I'm only better than you in the strength of my Mana. As for everything else, I'm lagging far behind you."

He admired Link's profound insight in magic theory and he knew that he had a long way to go before he could reach Link's level of wisdom. But unfortunately, Link's natural Mana was just too weak, and Eliard feared that Link's future paths might be limited because of it.

Although Link had told him that his Mana was low because of a serious injury, Eliard always assumed that this was something Link believed as a way to encourage himself and never took it seriously.

"Alright, alright, let's stop licking each other's boots," said Link, "Here, I've brought you six Earth Spike magical scrolls."

Link then handed Eliard the magic scrolls that he smuggled out of his Mage Tower.

Eliard was a favorite of Moira's and she didn't have many apprentices in her Mage Tower anyway, so Eliard quickly became her chief apprentice who was now in charge of managing the tower's income. Both the income and status of Moira's Mage Tower were roughly equal to that of Bale's.

The magic scrolls and potions that the apprentices prepared, along with the magic materials that they collected were all handed by Eliard, who then sold it. So Link handed over his scrolls for him to sell, which Link thought a most convenient

arrangement.

Eliard suddenly turned serious while he carefully examined the scrolls.

"Link, the quality of your scrolls is getting better and better!" said Eliard, "Is this structure one of your new modifications?"

He examined the scrolls, not to check the quality because he knew it had always been superb—what he was appreciating now was the little details added to the scrolls.

Link glanced at the spot where Eliard pointed out and nodded.

"That's right," replied Link.

These special structures were only present on the scrolls he handed over to Eliard. Those given to Warwick were all normal magic scrolls.

"When I was working on it, I had a sudden revelation how the ordinary scroll writing methods only guaranteed the success rate of magic scrolls production but did not maximize the power of the magic scrolls. So, I tinkered about and made some slight changes. Although the preparation process became slightly more complicated now, the power of this Earth Spike was increased by about 50%, making it much more lethal."

"That's incredible!" exclaimed Eliard, "I'll negotiate with the merchant I sold these scrolls to. These scrolls should be able to get the price of a gold coin. Link, did you know our scrolls have been selling like hot cakes? The merchants told me many mercenaries swear by them. They even gave your Earth Spikes a nickname – they call them 'Spears of Death'! If you could write more of these modified magic scrolls, I'm sure our sales would go through the roof!"

Link nodded. He'd heard similar sentiments from Warwick earlier.

"No problem, I will prepare modified Lesser Protective Armor, Basic Sharpness Spell and Lesser Invisibility as soon as possible. I'll bring them with me the next time we meet."

Link didn't bother to hide his true powers from Eliard. He couldn't even if he wanted to anyway, since they'd been having deep discussions of theories in magic in their letters. They were both well aware of one another's skills and knowledge.

Besides, who would refuse to earn more money?

Link himself had never thought that he would carve out a name for himself from this small business of magic scrolls. It was as if he'd stumbled upon a pot of gold when he had least expected it. He had a sudden inspiration to start up a business of selling magic gear and weapons and expand it across the Firuman continent.

If the business thrived, it could turn him into a millionaire!

But of course, Link's main focus was still on learning magic. As for the matter of earning money, he would only regard it as a diversion, as something that would support his studies in magic. But he was not in a hurry about it and was taking it step by step, slowly building his prestige.

"It's a deal then."

Eliard was not worried about the speed at which Link could produce the modified magic scrolls at all.

He put the magic scrolls away and the two Magicians began to enjoy the lunch that Eliard brought. After they had finished eating, they rested for a while, and then they began to exchange their thoughts and experiences in magic as usual.

There was no doubt that Eliard was a genius. On Earth, his IQ would've definitely been more than 200. Link was an Archmage in his previous life, and on top of that was given a boost by the Lord of Light, so his brain power was no less incredible.

Both young men's thinking speed was astonishingly fast and active. One of them would only say a few words, and the other would immediately catch the other's meaning. They would then answer with their own insights, and these insights were often sharp and instructive.

If someone were to overhear their conversation, they would probably think that the two were talking gibberish.

But that's what happened when two extraordinary minds conversed and engaged. Their discussions were always fast-paced, lively and full of creative ideas. It would be best not to try to understand their thoughts as it would only serve to confuse and bewilder.

Because Link had a deeper insight into magical theories and facts, he was the one who took the lead in most parts of their conversation.

"I was studying the Level-1 Fireball spell recently and I think the fireball's magic structure is far from perfect and can be improved at C-position. What do you think about this?" asked Eliard as he sketched a structure onto a piece of goatskin paper.

Link glanced and shook his head, then erased a small portion of the structure that Eliard had shown him and added changes in two different spots.

"Maybe this is better," said Link.

"Oh... You're right, that's much better. Wait, isn't that the alpha-structure in the Invisibility spell? Is this an Invisible Fireball spell?" asked the bewildered Eliard.

"Haha, it's something I came up with when I was studying Lesser Invisibility," answered Link, "You see, these changes would greatly reduce the light of the Fireball, which would be useful in making sneak attacks...but this is just a theory. You'd have to figure out the way to actually cast the spell yourself."

Eliard was then lost in his thoughts. He was pondering the feasibility of the structure Link had proposed. He believed that there would be no serious structural issue because Link's recommendations were theoretically and logically sound.

Ah, why must Link's Mana be so weak? If only there was a way to strengthen his innate Mana, he would definitely become one of the best Magicians in the East Cove Magic Academy. What a pity!

There was no jealousy in Eliard's heart. All he felt for Link was genuine compassion and sympathy.

Time flew by, and before the two young Magicians knew it, two hours had passed. Both Eliard and Link felt they had learned so much from their conversation.

Link stood up and stretched, then said, "It's late, I must go back now."

Eliard nodded, then slipped out a letter and handed it to Link.

"My tutor wanted me to pass this letter to you," said Eliard.

Link often asked Eliard's tutor, Moira, questions about magic and Eliard was always the messenger between the two. The correspondence between Link and Moira was nothing new to Eliard.

Link, however, was shocked. Herrera had answered the last questions he sent her only two days ago. Why would she send another letter so soon after the last one?

Had something happened?

Chapter 87

Eternal Darkness, New Avenues of Release

Despite being doubtful, Link received the letter and said, "Eliard, send my greetings to your teacher."

"I will." Eliard kept the items on the stone table and left after setting the date for their next meeting.

Link did not leave immediately. He looked around and after making sure no one was looking, then opened Herrera's letter. There was only a small paragraph on the letter. It was not written in human language, but in a long lost language from an ancient Earth Spirit civilization. Link specifically learned this language in order to converse with Herrera.

"I am sorry to disturb, my friend. The situation this time around is slightly special. Master Anthony has informed me that the academy's Detection Spell once again detected a strange dark energy coming from the Girvent Forest. While it is carefully hidden, the overflowing energy suggests the user might be extremely powerful, probably similar to the standard of a Level-6 Magician. I have already sent the Magic Crow to investigate and will personally interfere once I have gotten concrete evidence. However, to not raise the suspicion of Magician Bale, this will be a secret mission. I may need the assistance of another Magician then. If you are willing to travel with me, please contact me so that I can make the necessary preparations. I will give a good reason for you to take a leave of absence from the academy and predict the journey to begin in a month. This is extremely dangerous. If you truly wish to travel with me, please be prepared."

The moment Link finished reading, the letter combusted with a brilliant flame. At the same time, a new mission appeared in his field of vision.

New mission: Travelling Together.

Mission: Leave the academy when the time is ripe to help Herrera in her investigation into the origin of the dark energy in the Girvent Forest.

Reward: 100 Omni Points.

Link shuddered at the sight of such a hefty reward. This would be a difficult mission. But could he reject Herrera's request? Of course not! Herrera was an Angel of Light, and a strong ally in his fight against the dark forces. If she required assistance, he would gladly render it.

Link accepted the mission.

Luckily, there was still a month before the mission began. By then, Link would have recovered from his weakened state and his Domingo Crystal will be purified. He should also be able to invent a few more Supreme Magical Skills in this period, accumulating a few more Omni Points. He would become an extremely strong Level-4 Magician by then.

This should be enough to deal with the mission.

However, even with so much equipment and spells, Link was still afraid. He remembered that darkness always emerged from new openings whenever another was sealed off. While Link had certain knowledge of the openings up until now, he had no background information on these new openings.

As he continued rewriting history, he was also slowly losing his advantage of knowing the future.

Darkness is always present; it has merely found another way to release its power. I wonder what kind of calamities will be unleashed when it eventually goes out of control. Link sighed.

It was already four o'clock in the afternoon and the sun was setting. Link had a busy day and casually strolled back to Bale's Mage Tower, preparing to take a good rest. When he reached the hall, he saw the apprentices assembling in front of the podium, and Derek seemed to be announcing something important as the manager of the Mage Tower.

Link headed quietly to his seat in the corner and listened.

"All in all, the royal army has issued a huge order, and they have high expectations for the quality, especially the stability of the equipment. We will have to complete the order in time and give our highest quality equipment..." Derek was full of energy and

inspiration, but the apprentices listening had a pained expression on their face.

After listening for a while, Link understood. It seemed like the Nordic Kingdom was preparing to launch a revenge assault on the Pralync Kingdom of the Dark Elves in the Dark Forest. Naturally, they would need a variety of resources, such as magic scrolls and potions for their battle.

In the game, after the massacre in Gladstone City, the Dark Elves received divine blessings from the Spider Queen Lolth, and got their hands on a divine weapon. The Nordic kingdom had been suffering defeats ever since.

History is changing, I wonder what will be the result this time? For some weird reason, Link felt especially worried.

As Link was late to the meeting, he went straight to Warwick to inquire more about the mission. "Warwick, what kind of mission is this?"

Warwick was clearly troubled. He fully extended his five fingers and said, "From today onward, everyone will have to write five magic scrolls per day, for a total of 20 days. Our Mage Tower was assigned to write 800 Level-0 Magic scrolls. I will also help with the writing."

Link immediately understood. There were only seven apprentices in charge of writing magic scrolls in the Mage Tower. With the addition of Warwick, that would be eight. To be able to complete 800 scrolls in 20 days, that would mean 100 scrolls per person, thus five scrolls per day.

However, the Mana and energy of the apprentices were limited. The more scrolls they wrote, the higher their chance of failure due to fatigue. Five magic scrolls per day was a huge burden for a low-level Magician's Apprentice.

As a high-level Magician's Apprentice in charge of magic scrolls, Warwick would then have to personally fill in the gaps if the low-level apprentices could not perform.

Warwick felt terrible simply thinking about the days ahead.

Link had an idea. "Are there any specific requirements for the scrolls?" he asked.

"Yes. The army only wants Lesser Sharpness and Lesser Armor supporting magic scrolls."

"But I only know Lesser Armor."

If Link had said that he already mastered both spells, it would cause a great ruckus in the Mage Tower. Mastering a Level-0 spell in two weeks seemed just about right.

"What? You learned Lesser Armor?" Warwick's eyes lit up. He did not factor Link into his calculations because Link had only been writing Earth Spike scrolls all along.

"I just mastered it, and I'm still not too used to them yet. I am afraid of announcing it." Link stuck out a finger and tapped himself lightly. After one second, a pale green glow enveloped his body.

This was indeed the Level-0 spell, Lesser Armor.

Warwick was at a loss for words.

"It's fine, completely fine, just practice more and you will get used to it. Ha, what good news!" That meant a total of nine people will be participating, Warwick felt a weight lifted off his shoulders.

When Derek was done speaking, Warwick assembled the apprentices and announced, "Time is tight and we have a lot of scrolls to make. Begin as soon as possible." He distributed 10 blank scrolls and a bottle of silver ink to everyone.

All the apprentices sighed while they collected their ink and scrolls. Link, on the other hand, kept silent. He was not the slightest bit anxious about the creation of magic scrolls and went back to his room to read.

As for the magic scrolls, he would get to it after he was tired of reading and ran out of inspiration for his thesis; it was simply an easy task.

All good news is usually accompanied by bad news. The next day, an accident occurred. Two magic apprentices were too nervous about the scroll writing task that they burned the midnight oil in an attempt to complete them. Due to extreme fatigue, they made mistakes and caused their Mana to rebound back to their bodies, dealing serious internal damage. While they were still alive due to the relatively low-level of their Mana, they would need about a month to recover. These two apprentices were not allowed to use magic for the whole month.

As such, the number of people writing the scrolls was reduced to a pathetic seven,

with one of them being Link, a newbie to the spell. Warwick simply wished no more accidents would happen!

"Five scrolls a day, nothing more, if you feel tired do not force yourself to complete the mission. I will think of a way!" Warwick was afraid his apprentices would overwork and kept emphasizing the issue of health.

On the other hand, Warwick himself was going insane from writing magic scrolls in fear that the order would not be met. He actually wrote eight scrolls in one night, at the expense of his concentration and sanity.

Warwick even planned to purchase some scrolls from the market to make up the numbers. However, the magic scrolls in the market had already been bought up by the army. Even if he wanted to pay royalties for the scrolls, they were nowhere to be found.

What a pitiful guy. Link felt sorry for him and decided to lend him a hand. He could also use this chance to create waves in the Mage Tower.

Chapter 88

As Beautiful as a Work of Art

Bale's Mage Tower, in the main hall on the first floor.

...

"Four scrolls, five scrolls, four scrolls... Zach, why did you only submit three scrolls?" asked Warwick, staring at the simple and honest apprentice in front of him while massaging his temple.

"I had rotten luck yesterday. I made the same mistake three times in a row, so I dared not continue after that."

In the process of magic scroll preparation, making a series of mistakes was a sign of exhaustion. That meant that one's focus was no longer sustainable. When this happened, the best thing to do was to put down the quill and take a rest. If you were to force yourself to go on working, dangerous accidents were likely to happen.

This was a valuable lesson passed down from generation to generation. In magic, one must take every precaution because recklessness was the main cause of accidents.

Knowing this, Warwick couldn't think of anything to say. But he noticed how sullen Zach had turned, so he had to say something to comfort him.

"Don't worry, I'll find a solution," said Warwick.

"I'm really sorry, Warwick," said Zach, wrought with guilt.

The six Magician's Apprentices then collected all the magic scrolls they produced in a day, including the six magic scrolls that Warwick himself had worked his tail off to produce. Today he received 30 magic scrolls, so when added to yesterday's 35, Warwick now had a total of 65 magic scrolls.

But they only had 20 days, and with this pace, they'd be lucky to be able to produce 700 magic scrolls. Producing 800 was simply impossible!

We're lagging too far behind schedule. Warwick had lost all hopes of completing the task. All he was thinking now was how to break the news to Derek.

Our tutor is a proud Magician. He'd be furious if he found out that we couldn't complete the task. Then he'd lose his temper and make our lives a nightmare! Warwick had already begun to imagine the gloomy days ahead.

Click. It was the sound of Link opening the door of the small room under the staircase. Link came out from with his hands full of magic scrolls.

"Link, how many did you manage to produce today?" asked Warwick, whose eyes lit up instantly when he saw Link.

As he was speaking, his eyes were fixed on the magic scrolls in Link's hands. He started to count them silently.

"It's my lucky day today and I guess I'm starting to get the hang of it. Anyway, I manage to produce five of them," said Link as he handed over the magic scrolls.

Warwick perked up immediately. He did not expect the beginner to have produced five magic scrolls on only the second day. In fact, Warwick himself had only managed to produce two yesterday.

He took the magic scrolls and accordingly examined them one by one.

As always, the scrolls' surface was very neat, and the brushwork of the magic runes was full of a sense of fluidity that was hard to describe in words. The Mana within the magic scrolls flowed in a simple and elegant manner, giving the observer a pleasant feeling.

"These are all high-quality magic scrolls! Excellent job!" Warwick couldn't help but praise. He found that just looking at Link's magic scrolls gave him a sense of pleasure. In fact, he wanted to keep staring at them and was reluctant to put it away.

Naturally, all five scrolls were perfect. Warwick put the magic scrolls down carefully, and then looked at Link's face, and asked with concern, "How do you feel today? Are you tired?"

"No, I'm fine. I don't feel tired at all," Link calmly answered after shaking his head.

"That's good, then. But remember not to be reckless and take a rest when you're tired. Don't ever force yourself too hard," Warwick repeated the same advice. He was still shaken after losing two apprentices.

"I got it," replied Link, with a ghost of a smile on his face.

Producing five magic scrolls was nothing to him. In fact, he actually produced 15 today, but he didn't want to show all of it to Warwick for fear of causing a commotion.

He'd actually only spent an hour and a half to produce those magic scrolls. He even had half a day's time to read the textbook after that, and then spent a long time working on his thesis before coming out of the room.

All in all, the whole business of producing magic scrolls did not affect his studies at all.

On the fourth day, Link doubled his efforts and produced 20 magic scrolls. He spent the whole day working on Lesser Protective Armor magic scrolls. He became so adept at it that he could do it with his eyes closed and not make a single mistake. Link was a perfectionist though and he paid attention to every little detail no matter what he's doing, so his magic scrolls had actually gotten better and better in quality.

When it was time to submit the scrolls in the early evening, Link saw Warwick mired in gloom.

"Warwick, what's the matter?" Link asked.

"Everyone's dog-tired, and we'd only received 28 scrolls today. I'm sure we'll produce less and less every day. If we go on like this, there's simply no way we would ever complete the task!" Warwick sluggishly replied, his body was slumped on the table.

Warwick himself had only produced five scrolls today. After three days of straining himself to produce as many magic scrolls as possible, he was now wrung out like a towel. It was now obvious that he couldn't manage it alone and that he must report to Derek and ask for his help.

After finishing his sentence, he looked up at Link, and saw him holding a huge pile of scrolls.

"Are those really..." Warrick was stupefied, he wondered if the scrolls in Link's hands really were magic scrolls. It seemed there were more scrolls now than there was

yesterday!

"Luck really was on my side today, and I managed to produce seven magic scrolls. Here you go," said Link, smiling as he gently placed his magic scrolls on Warwick's table.

"What? Seven scrolls? That's impossible!" exclaimed Warwick, jolting up from his languid position.

Seven magic scrolls wouldn't have been such an incredible number if Link was a high-level Magician's Apprentice. But Link was clearly a novice with very weak Mana and had in fact just learned to prepare Lesser Protective Armor magic scroll days ago! How could he possibly produce seven magic scrolls in a day?

Warwick's voice was quite loud just now, and many apprentices heard him and began to gather around. Among them was Matt, who had only managed to produce three magic scrolls each day for these past few days.

"What about the quality of the magic scrolls, though?" asked Matt, who was understandably skeptical. He was a mid-level Magician's Apprentice, but he'd had a run of bad luck these few days, which made him more and more anxious by the day. Even three scrolls a day had required him to stretch almost to his limits. So how could a newcomer who had only arrived days earlier produce more than twice his number?

"Yeah, they're not useless scrolls, are they?" someone else chimed in.

In fact, seven magic scrolls a day, for all the apprentices in the hall, was undeniably impressive. Of all the apprentices gathered there, Warwick who had produced eight magic scrolls on the first day, was probably the only one who could surpass this number.

Warwick was still speechless. He unfolded Link's magic scroll one by one and began to examine them.

As soon as the magic scrolls were unfolded, the apprentices around all broke into muffled cries of wonder.

How could magic scrolls be so pleasing to the eye? Why does the flow of Mana on the scrolls enchant me so much? These were the thoughts running through the apprentices' head after Link's magic scrolls were unveiled.

"They're magnificent!" someone whispered.

These were all Magician's Apprentices, after all, so they knew a high-quality magic scroll when they saw one. In fact, most of them could judge the quality of a magic scroll in one glance. Although these were just Level-0 Lesser Protective Armor magic scrolls, they knew that in order to produce such superior magic scrolls, immense willpower and talent were required.

Suddenly, the apprentices began to view Link in a new light. They couldn't help but respect him for having achieved such a miraculous feat.

Initially, most of the apprentices in the Mage Tower regarded Link as a nobody whose existence was dispensable. But now, their views were beginning to change.

Then, Warwick checked the second magic scroll.

Once he unfurled it, he saw the same smooth flowing magic runes, and the same elegant and harmonious Mana flow. The scroll gave the observer a sense of enchantment that made them unwilling to put it down or look away from it.

"Lord of Light, what a wonderful magic scroll. It's as beautiful as a work of art! I don't think I could ever bring myself to use it," whispered one of the apprentices after a long appreciative sigh.

Creating a magic scroll was like calligraphy, in a sense. When a word was well written, it became a work of art that could be sold for a lot of gold coins. But if the same word was written poorly, then it's no different from the scratchings of a dog, for which no one would bother to give a second glance.

Judging from the apprentices' reactions, Link's magic scrolls were works of art.

After Warwick had checked Link's magic scrolls one by one, he found that all seven were, without exception, of the highest quality. The crowd burst into another wave of exclamations.

If only one or two of the magic scrolls were excellent, then it could still be regarded as a result of dumb luck. But when all seven were incredible, it could only mean that Link was truly talented. The strength of his Mana might be pitifully weak, but from now on no one could deny the fact that he was extremely gifted in producing marvelous magic scrolls!

Link had been in Bale's Mage Tower for more than half a month, but today was the first day that he was truly recognized by the other apprentices.

Little did they know, though, that producing seven scrolls a day was just the beginning.

Chapter 89

The First Loophole in the Fortress

Even though Link was submitting seven scrolls per day, it was still not sufficient to fill in the gap of 100 scrolls. Left with no choice, Warwick went to knock on the door of Magician Derek.

"Who is it?" Derek's voice rang from inside the room. Somehow, he sounded slightly nervous.

How strange, maybe Derek is doing something that he doesn't want others to know? Warwick thought.

Derek was quite introverted and didn't have much talent in magic. He was thus not exactly respected amongst the apprentices.

"It's me, Warwick."

"Why did you come here at this ungodly hour?"

Derek clearly sounded displeased. His footsteps were getting closer and the door slowly opened. Derek stood behind the door with a vexed expression.

The moment the door creaked open, Warwick picked up a faint odor with his sensitive sense of smell.

What is this? It smells slightly like sulfur and a bit like rosin; there is even a slight hint of rotting flesh. This is weird.

Warwick had never experienced anything like this before.

"Be quick. What do you want to say?" Derek rumbled, breaking Warwick's train of thought.

"Oh, the thing is ..." Warwick was afraid to speak. After mumbling for a few seconds, he noticed Derek's growing look of annoyance and timidly said, "Sir, we may not be

able to complete the order on time."

As expected, this sentence caused Derek to frown with annoyance, "What exactly happened? I remember you had eight, no, with the addition of the new guy, nine helpers. 800 scrolls in 20 days should not be difficult, am I right?"

"No, we are only left with seven. Hanson and Manster suffered damages from Mana rebound. I am only receiving 35 scrolls per day. Sir, I have been writing five scrolls every day as well. We have all done our best but it is still not enough. We are still 100 scrolls short." Warwick helplessly threw out his hands.

Derek immediately blew up upon hearing this sentence, "Damn it! You idiots! How do you expect me to find extra manpower for you at this time? The departments for potions and low-level magic equipment are also short of people. The entire academy is doing their best to complete the order on time! Do you expect me to personally help you?"

Derek was a Level-2 Magician—to downgrade himself by writing Level-0 magic scrolls was simply a joke! He would not accept it!

Furthermore, he was not adept at writing magic scrolls. His competency in magic scroll writing was probably only the level of a higher magic apprentice. But most importantly, he was busy making money. He was learning a Level-3 spell and was at the final stages of implementing it. He needed to rent the Elemental Pool only available to lecturers.

The rental fee of the Elemental Pool was 100 gold coins per hour and his experiment required three hours of usage. Usually, he needed a month to earn 100 gold coins.

Hence, he simply had no time to be embroiled in this mess!

Warwick was clearly troubled and misunderstood, he shook his head frantically, "No sir! Of course not! I am just wondering if we could reduce the number of scrolls we need to produce—for example 700, no, 750?"

Derek objected vehemently. "The order was discussed and confirmed between master and the army. I have no power to change the contract...damn it, why do I have to deal with this!"

Derek was in a pinch. As the head of the mid-level magic equipment department in the

tower, if Warwick made a mistake, the blame would be attributed to Derek instead!

Of course, he would not be stripped of his position as a manager. However, it would probably affect his commission which would delay his Level-3 spell experiment indefinitely.

"What do I do? Master Bale has been acting weirder by the day. The part where I was tasked to procure strange magical resources was especially disturbing. Oh lord, why am I so unlucky!" Derek's mood was at absolute zero.

After pondering for a while, Derek could not think of any good alternatives. If he wanted to facilitate his progress as a Magician, he would have to shoulder some of the weight.

Left with no choice, he said, "I will ask around the other towers to see if they have extra finished scrolls. However, don't count on me for this. Try your best to write more and narrow the gap, understand?"

Warwick nodded gratefully. "Yes sir, I will definitely give it my all."

"Ok, now go!" Derek commanded.

However, reality was often harsh and cruel. On the second day after reporting the situation to Derek, Warwick gave his best effort and wrote six magic scrolls. Together with the scrolls he collected from the other apprentices, he received only 25 scrolls in total. Link was the only one who had not submitted his scrolls.

Oh no, everyone is starting to feel tired and losing their speed. Warwick thought. If this went on, the gap would widen to 200 or even 300 scrolls.

He did not even want to think about that.

As Warwick was feeling helpless, a door at the bottom of the stairs punctually opened. Link stood at the entrance with a stack of scrolls in his hand.

Warwick's eyes widened with delight and he rushed forward.

"Link, how many did you write today?"

Without waiting for the answer, Warwick started counting, One, two, three...eight,

nine, ten? Did I count correctly?

Warwick rubbed his eyes and counted again. As simple as the counting was, Warwick simply couldn't believe it.

Just two days ago, Link was only writing five scrolls per day and just yesterday he wrote seven. Now, he was writing ten! This was an amazing exponential increase. Wouldn't he be drained from all this work?

Warwick finally confirmed the numbers after counting them once more. He couldn't help but shout, "In the name of the God of Light, Link, you really wrote ten scrolls! That is incredible!"

This number reverberated through the hall and caught the attention of every apprentice. Everyone's attention was immediately captured and assembled towards Link.

Ten scrolls a day had been the record of the Mage Tower for the past 3 years. To think that someone managed to accomplish it was definitely shocking.

"Warwick, quick, examine the quality of the scrolls!" If all the scrolls were successful products, Link would be too amazing.

Perhaps Link had no talent in Mana and was more introverted, but if he continued to produce high-quality magic scrolls at such an alarming rate, he would definitely earn his place in the East Cove Higher Magic Academy.

Warwick swallowed nervously as he began his examination. Many others came forward to inspect the work as well. Unsurprisingly, all ten scrolls were not only successes, but also of premium quality. The strokes were clearly defined and rounded off nicely with a glossy finish. You wouldn't want to let go of it the moment you held it in your hands.

The most shocking thing was that the ten scrolls looked exactly the same, as though they were printed using the same stencil.

"Link, you really are incredible!" Warwick had great respect for Link from the bottom of his heart. He truly felt that in terms of magic scroll writing, Link was no doubt the best among all the apprentices.

Link merely gave a smile as though this achievement was nothing to be proud of.

"If there is nothing wrong with the scrolls, I'll be going back to my room."

"Yes, please rest well," Warwick hastily replied. He had a feeling that their chance of meeting the deadline now depended entirely on Link.

Link continued to produce stellar work the next day, submitting 13 magic scrolls. Not only had he broken the record of Bale's Mage Tower, he had also broken the record of the entire East Cove Higher Magic academy which was at 12 magic scrolls in a day. The quality of his work was, as usual, still of extremely good quality.

All of the apprentices were blown away!

The news traveled really fast and before long, the whole academy heard of a magic scroll genius in Bale's Mage Tower who wrote 13 premium magic scrolls in a day.

The next day, the news got even more absurd, 13 magic scrolls became 14, and eventually, 15 magic scrolls consistently every day.

Link was known as a monster.

In ten days, Warwick received a total of 420 magic scrolls, out of which, 120 magic scrolls were written by Link. The other six apprentices, him included, only contributed 300. Link's contribution was more than twice the work of an ordinary apprentice.

"It seems that we are not only narrowing the gap, but we might even be able to complete the order on time!" Warwick calculated the number of scrolls in advance and was in awe.

Just then the door below the stairs creaked open again with Link bringing out a thick stack of magic scrolls.

Warwick immediately dropped what he was doing and rushed towards him, grinning from ear to ear.

"Let me carry it. I bought some delicious food from Lecturer Moira's Mage Tower for you. Please go enjoy." Link was now his treasured apprentice; he had to treat him with hospitality.

"Thank you." Link nodded and dug into the feast Warwick had prepared. By the time he was done, Warwick had also finished his examination of the scrolls. Every single one of them was still of premium quality.

"I will be going out for a stroll. I got bored from sitting down too long," Link said. He had been wanting to try out a Supreme Magical Skill he developed recently and needed to make a trip to Herrera's Mage Tower.

"Yes, please go and relax," Warwick spoke in an unusually polite tone.

Derek walked into the tower with a pained expression just three minutes after Link left. The moment he saw Warwick, he hastily asked, "How are the magic scrolls coming along?"

As an official Magician, Derek never mixed with the apprentices. Hence, he was completely unaware of the news circulating amongst them. More importantly, he was extremely busy these few days trying to find an alternative to the magic scroll shortage issue. He was out in River Cove Town trying to purchase magic scrolls for a high price and at the same time, generating monetary resources for his own experiment. It was driving him crazy.

He did his best, but the results were limited. As of now, he only received 20 magic scrolls.

There were only ten days remaining. If he could not find another alternative, he would have to up down his pride and fill in the gaps himself.

He did not expect to be greeted by a jubilant Warwick.

"Sir, I have good news. The gap has been filled."

"What?" Derek was appalled.

"Haven't you heard? A magic scroll genius has appeared in the tower," another apprentice joined the conversation.

"Genius? Who?" Derek was even more confused.

Chapter 90

Now's My Chance!

Bale's Mage Tower

...

Not only did he manage to produce 15 magic scrolls a day, but each scroll's quality was this exquisite, too? Derek stared incredulously at the Lesser Protective Armor magic scrolls unfolded on the table in front of him.

Even lay people with no experience in magic would perceive the exquisite beauty of these magic scrolls. In Derek's eyes, as a full-fledged Magician one word ran through his mind—perfection.

Even low-quality blank scrolls and ordinary magical ink provided by the Mage Tower could not conceal the preternatural elegance of the silvery magic aura that the magic runes on the scrolls exuded.

The aura of the magic scrolls seemed as graceful and agile as a silvery trout that cruised in a lake bathed in moonlight, while shrouded in the mysterious aura of magic. Derek couldn't peel his eyes away from these scrolls; at times they were so breathtaking that it almost suffocated him.

These sublime magic scrolls are too precious to be touched by the coarse hands of those barbaric soldiers, thought Derek. They should be framed and sold at a high price as works of art instead!

Yes, it would be much more appropriate to sell these as pieces of artwork rather than as cheap weapons. But perhaps even that was not good enough for these unearthly magic scrolls.

Their only minute flaws were the inferior blank scrolls and magical ink, as well as the low-level spell. Nothing could be done about the low-level spell, since the creator of these magic scrolls was only a beginner Magician's Apprentice. He could easily improve the other two factors, though.

Young aristocrats love to collect magical items and wealthy merchants like to use them to decorate their storefronts as well. If I were to sell these to them, I'm sure they could fetch at least 10 gold coins each.

Derek was short of money, so he had to squeeze out the meager entrepreneurial talents that he had out of desperation. In fact, he even surprised himself for having been able to come up with what he considered to be a shrewd idea.

The kid can produce 15 scrolls a day which means that a daily income of 100 gold is a given. As for the kid, I'm sure he'd be happy with 10 gold coins a day.

Derek gently coughed and told Warwick, "Well, I'm relieved there are no apparent problems. Why don't you take these magic scrolls? I bought them in the River Cove Town at a high price. Although there are only 20 of them here, I'm sure they could at least slightly ease your stress burden."

"How much did these scrolls cost?" Warwick hastily asked.

Experience taught Warwick that Derek was a very stingy man, he would never spend money on anything that would not profit him in the end.

But to his surprise, Derek only waved his hand and said, "You don't have to pay me for them this time. Just keep on with your hard work and complete the task."

"Thank you very much for your help, Mr. Derek," said the stunned Warwick, his heart filled with gratitude. Derek replied with a nod.

Twenty scrolls really weren't much at all, but still, it was the equivalent of an average Magician's Apprentices' five days' worth of effort. So now they had 440 completed magic scrolls. In the remaining ten days they'd only need to prepare 360 more magic scrolls which wasn't too much to deal with.

"Where's Link?" asked Derek, "I'd like to meet him."

"He was tired after preparing the magic scrolls, so he went out for a walk," answered Warwick.

"I see. When he returns, tell him to come to my room," said Derek.

"I will," replied Warwick.

Meanwhile, Link was oblivious to how he had been a part of Derek's scheme. Although to be honest, he had deliberately demonstrated his talents in the magic scrolls because he wanted to attract the attention of some high-ranking Magicians in the Mage Tower. If he kept on mingling with low-level apprentices, there would be no way for him to investigate Bale or learn his secrets.

In fact, Link wasn't out for a simple walk either, but was instead going to Moira's Mage Tower. He was going there under the guise of visiting his friend Eliard, but in truth, he was going to conduct magic experiments.

After ten days of preparing magic scrolls, Link had reaped quite a few benefits from the sustained intense focus required in the activity.

Through his strict perfectionism, he learned how to control his Mana more precisely. If he could focus his Mana into a point as small as the breadth of a strand of human hair before this, now he had improved so much that he could focus his Mana to a point as fine as the breadth of a spider's silk.

The smaller the point he could focus his Mana onto, the finer the thread of Mana that would be used to construct spell structures would be. That meant that the Mana consumption for each spellcasting process would be reduced as well and allow for more intricate spell structures to be built.

For example, Link now only needed 0.9 Mana points to release a Glass Orb of the same power, while one Whistle only consumed 3.5 points.

But this wasn't the only benefit Link acquired.

By continuously producing magic scrolls of Lesser Protective Armor, he was hit with an inspiration on how to modify the structure of the spell. After dozens of changes, he finally created a new Supreme Magical Skill modification for the spell and integrated it into the Level-2 Guarding Barrier spell. As a result, he made drastic changes to these spells while also upgrading their levels!

The original Guarding Barrier would cover the surface of the spellcaster's body with a layer of elemental magic which would provide some protection against magic spell attacks. But after modification, a more powerful repulsive field was added on top of the existing barrier, making the spellcaster immune to physical attacks as well.

However, because Link spent most of his time in Bale's Mage Tower, this spell had only

been running around in his mind with no chance for him to actually test it. Although he had been running countless simulations in his mind to ensure that there were no serious flaws, the newly-modified Guarding Barrier had now been upgraded to a Level-3 spell. That meant that there would be a higher risk that serious accidents may occur even from the slightest imbalance of energy. Link wouldn't risk testing it out in his room and thought it best to do it in the protective environment of the Elemental Pool.

As he entered Moira's Mage Tower, Eliard was already at the door waiting to meet him. His face lit up the moment he saw Link.

"Link, I didn't expect you to be able to produce magic scrolls so quickly! I tried it myself, but I could never exceed ten scrolls a day, yet you managed to produce 15! That's just scary!" said Eliard.

"I guess I had a lot of practice. I wasn't so quick myself when I first started," said Link, laughing.

"I'm sure a little bit of genius didn't hurt as well. I mean, I could never produce magic scrolls as sublime as yours in a million years." Eliard understood how difficult it was to create magic scrolls, so he knew there was more to Link's achievement than blind practice.

They both chatted and laughed while they walked into the tower. It was Link's first time here, and he noticed how the interior of this Mage Tower was similar to Bale's, except in a slightly smaller scale and with an additional air of compassion and warmth versus the cold and competitive atmosphere in Bale's Mage Tower. Link also noticed how the apprentices here laughed and smiled while they were chatting with each other—a foreign sight in Bale's Mage Tower. When they reached the hall, the apprentices all turned to Eliard and greeted him warmly.

"My Prince, is this your friend?" A beautiful female apprentice came up to Eliard and flirtatiously leaned her body on his while giving Link an inquisitive look.

Even though everyone had heard the news of a magic scroll genius in Bale's Mage Tower, very few people knew what he looked like.

"Elena, stop bothering me!" said Eliard as he shoved the girl away, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Although his tone sounded cold, Link could sense a tinge of guilt in Eliard's voice. He knew then that the girl Elena must have had him wrapped around her fingers.

Poor Eliard, I guess being handsome does come with its own trouble, Link thought sarcastically.

Link then diverted his eyes to Elena. She seemed to be about 18 years old and she had long flowing pale blond hair. She blinked her large sky-blue eyes a great deal, making her look like an innocent child. But judging from the strength of her Mana, she must already be a high-level Magician's Apprentice. This made her seem mysterious and effervescent.

From Link's first glance, Elena seemed to be both an innocent young girl and a gifted Magician. But by the second glance he immediately discarded his first impression of her. He could sense that she had been putting on act.

The Magician's robe on her body hugged her waist line snugly and she seemed to have spent a great deal of time and effort on her exquisite hairstyle. Finally, there was that affected curiosity she put on when she's around Eliard. Considering how fast she was able to get familiar with Eliard, it seemed she must've understood Eliard's obsessive devotion to magic learning and used it to her advantage. Her only fault was that she was still quite young, so her inexperience had made her acts obvious to Link's scrutinizing eyes. Link thought this innocent-looking girl was not to be underestimated.

Elena, Elena... What a familiar name. Link couldn't quite put a finger on where he'd heard that name before, though he felt it was uncannily familiar.

Then, Eliard turned to Link, wordlessly asking for his permission before he introduced Link to everyone in the hall, to which Link nodded in assent. He had no need to hide his identity here.

"Everyone," Eliard began. "This is Link, the magic scroll genius from Bale's Mage Tower. You've all heard about him, haven't you?"

"Oh...!" Before Eliard could finish his sentence, gasps echoed through the hall. The apprentices all turned their eyes to Link. They examined Link up and down, eager to find out what a genius looked like.

The apprentices were soon disappointed, though. Because of the greatly improved

living conditions in the academy, Link had actually gained some weight and grown slightly taller too, but that did nothing to improve his terribly plain and unremarkable appearance.

"I wouldn't know him from Adam," said one apprentice in a deflated tone.

"He's got a very weak aura," said another, "Honestly, I'm not sure how his Mana could sustain him through the process of preparing 15 magic scrolls."

"I guess the rumors were exaggerated," one of them concluded.

"No, you're all wrong! Eliard is a true genius, so his friend must be great as well!"

That was Elena. She managed to refute the previous remarks while simultaneously flattering Eliard without offending Link.

With all the clamoring voices that erupted after that, Eliard was getting irritated. He thought they were all too tactless and wanted to say a few words in Link's defense.

"Eliard, I don't have much time, let's go," said Link before Eliard could say anything. Link had actually snuck out of the Mage Tower and only had two hours before he must go back.

"Right, follow me." Eliard walked towards the stairs and Link followed him closely behind. No one else was around once they reached the second floor.

"Tell me about Elena. You both seem very intimate with each other. So you've found yourself a lover, huh?" joked Link.

"What are you talking about? I never thought of her that way," replied Eliard, with a wry smile on his face, "But Elena is a nice girl, she's helped me a lot, so I...well..."

"Fine, I get it," said Link, nodding his head. It seemed that Elena really was a sly fox who had identified Eliard's weakness. Shrewdness in a woman wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it depended on how she used that strength. Link wasn't sure what was going on exactly between Eliard and Elena, so he thought it best to stay away and not to meddle.

The two finally reached the third floor where the Elemental Pool was.

The role of an Element Pool was to control the scale and limit the power of magic spells. When magic spells were cast within the zone of the Elemental Pool, even high-level spells would have the power equivalent to that of Level-0 spells.

This allowed the Magicians to conduct high-energy experiments without having to worry about causing dangerous accidents.

There were three Elemental Pools in Herrera's Mage Tower. The main pool could contain Level-5 magic spells and below, while the other two could contain magic spells that were Level-3 and below. One of the smaller Elemental Pools was open to the apprentices and there was time allotted each week when the apprentices could use it for free. Eliard held the key to this Elemental Pool.

Eliard had 20 hours of free Elemental Pool usage per week. He never used up all the time himself, so Link borrowed his allotted time to conduct his experiment here.

The experiment Link had in mind today was a relatively simple one. He'd only used the Elemental Pool just to be extra cautious, so in the end Link only spent half an hour in there.

Half an hour later, Link's newly-modified defensive spell was fully developed.

The new spell was drastically different from the original Guarding Barrier. After casting the spell, Link's clothes were no longer covered in a glass-like film but was shrouded in a nebulous light instead. The light extended about three feet away from his body. The elemental barrier mingled within the light and when seen from a distance, it had an appearance of a fuzzy white cotton ball.

I'll call it Edelweiss, then, thought Link.

Edelweiss

Level-3 Elite Defensive Spell

Mana Consumption: 25 points.

Spellcasting Time: 0.9 seconds

Effects: Effectively resists both physical and magic spell attacks.

(Note: This is Link's Edelweiss.)

When he was done testing out the new spell, a rather familiar notification popped up, containing two messages:

Player Link successfully created a new Level-2 Supreme Magical Skill. 10 Omni Points rewarded.

The other one was an upgrade mission.

Player has successfully mastered a Level-3 spell and advanced to Level-3. 40 Omni Points rewarded.

Level-4 Upgrade Mission Activated.

Mission Details: Master a Level-4 spell and become a Level-4 Magician.

Mission Rewards: 70 Omni Points

Link's total Omni Points was now at 125 points and there were less than 20 days left before the effects of Ailing Mana would disappear.

By that time, his Maximum Mana would be 1480 points, which meant he could then use the Level-4 Flame Blast spell again. Plus, he even had a Level-5 Universal Crystal now, so he would no doubt experience an exponential leap in his strength soon!

Link was very much looking forward to this.

After leaving the Elemental Pool, Link bid farewell to Eliard and immediately headed back to Bale's Mage Tower. As soon as he opened the front door, Warwick was already there waiting for him.

"Link, Derek wants to see you," said Warwick.

Now's my chance! The moment that Link anticipated had arrived.

Chapter 91

A Frog in Warm Water

Derek's room was on the second floor of Bale's Mage Tower. As he was an official Magician and also managed the sales of low to mid-level magic equipment, he received preferable treatment.

The first thing that caught Link's attention when he entered the room was the small dining area more than 40 square meters wide. On the side of the dining area was a bookshelf. Link took a closer look and only spotted a few magic books, while the rest were simply items such as novels and anthologies, which were of no importance to a Magician.

The number of magic books a Magician had determined his status. From the looks of it, Derek was not doing very well. These Magicians were usually particularly obsessed with money, as it could potentially help them elevate their status.

Link knew with a glance that it would be easy to deceive Derek. He probably only needed a few weeks.

On the other side of the dining area was another shelf which displayed magic resources and craftwork. Link's attention was grabbed by a wooden circular object about the size of a fist. It had tiny dark green spots all over it.

It's a Dormant Forest Spirit Root!

Link recognized it almost immediately. It looked almost exactly the same as the in-game description of the item and as a previous Legendary Magician, Link knew all of the in-game items like the back of his hand.

The forest spirit was a type of magical creature that possessed both the traits of a plant and an animal. Its roots had extremely high absorption capabilities and one only had to bury the sphere and water it and watch it hatch almost instantaneously.

A creature with such strong powers of life naturally contained a lot of magical power, making it a good spellcasting resource.

The Dormant Forest Spirit Root was considered to be a mid-level spellcasting material and was widely used in many spells. Most of these spells were botanical in nature, however, one of them fell into the realm of dark magic.

It was the Revival spell and as the name suggested, it was a spell that allowed the user to achieve immortality.

However, such spells had overstepped the boundaries of the gods. Any mortal who coveted immortality was considered to have fallen to the dark side, as it was impossible to achieve full success. One might be able to achieve immortality, but definitely at the expense of other important traits.

Derek was in charge of procuring magic resources for Bale. This Dormant Forest Spirit Root could only be used by Level-4 Magicians and above. Derek was clearly not strong enough to use it yet, hence it must be for Bale.

It looks like Bale has already fallen to the dark side.

Link sighed. The reason for Bale's obsession with dark magic was simple. Bale was afraid to die and was already at least 60 years old. The only way to extend his life indefinitely was through dark magic.

Derek could never imagine that a simple spellcasting material placed on his shelf would reveal that much information. In his eyes, Link was his money tree. He warmly welcomed Link into his room with an inviting smile, "Come, take a seat and have a taste of my flaming wine."

Derek did not really respect Link as he felt Link only managed to enter this Mage Tower through connections. Deep down, he was even jealous. However, on the account of his gold coins, Derek put on a facade and treated Link extremely well.

Link sat down and appeared nervous as he took a sip of the wine before carefully asking, "Sir, you called for me?" Link's seemingly awkward demeanor bolstered Derek's courage even further. He took out Link's Lesser Armor magic scroll and asked, "Am I right to say that you wrote this?"

"Yes sir," Link nodded.

"It is very well written."

Derek was speaking from the bottom of his heart. He then continued, "However, for such an amazing piece of work, you only receive one silver coin as commission. This is the same as the ordinary, or even low-quality scrolls! It is too unfair!"

Link deliberately showed a movement in his eyes but kept quiet. Derek definitely had a motive for telling him this much.

Looking at Link's expression, Derek chuckled and asked, "Do you want to make a fortune from writing scrolls?"

"Sir, what is considered a fortune?" Link purposely sounded hasty and eager.

Derek laughed. Link's reaction was like a mirror image of his old self. He raised one finger, "I will give you one gold coin for every magic scroll—ten times what you currently earn! If you can continue writing 15 per day, you will be able to earn 15 gold coins every day. Is that considered a fortune then?"

Link eyes brightened with joy and he nodded ecstatically, "Of course! What exactly do I have to do?"

"You do not have to do anything extra, just continue to produce 15 premium quality magic scrolls every day. Of the 15 you produce, you give me 7 of them and I will replace them with the scrolls I write." Derek was willing to put down his pride and write Level-0 magic scrolls for the sake of earning extra income. Furthermore, the order must not be delayed.

"I guess that's fine..." Link took a while before agreeing.

Derek obviously had his eyes set on the market value of his scrolls. This cooperation would tie both him and Link into a mutually beneficial contract—the first step in forming a closer relationship and his opening to investigate more into Magician Bale.

The first cracks had appeared. Link knew that the day in which he exposed Bale's secret was not far.

"I will be going back then. Thank you, sir."

Link acted uncomfortable.

"Remember, the ordinary scrolls do not have to be exquisitely written. Those

mercenaries will not be able to appreciate it. However, put in more effort for those magic scrolls that you are giving me. Take care of your health and do not overwork yourself," Derek gently reminded.

"Yes sir, I'll keep that in mind." Link left Derek's room

Derek could not help but chuckle after Link closed the door behind him, "That guy is a treasure!" His advancement to a Level-3 Magician was now fully dependent on Link.

It was a silent night.

...

The next day, Derek delivered a stack of high-quality blank magic scrolls and a bottle of expensive golden ink to Link's room. Link also conscientiously wrote magic scrolls in his room and only left when it was four in the afternoon.

Link first submitted the ordinary scrolls to Warwick, before delivering the high-quality magic scrolls to Derek's room.

Derek was already waiting for him. The door opened almost immediately after he knocked. Derek was behind the door with a cheerful and natural smile on his face.

"You have arrived. These are the completed scrolls I suppose?" Derek set his sights on the stack of scrolls Link was carrying.

"Yes, sir." Link handed over the stack of scrolls.

"Please take a rest while I check them." Derek hastily received them and began checking.

He opened the first scroll carefully and stared in awe at the work of art that was displayed in front of him.

On the thick magic paper colored with a natural light green hue, a mysterious and smooth golden stroke seemed to dance with elegance. A harmonious and clean magic aura also emanated from the scroll. At the sides, Link meticulously penned down a different, but similarly exquisite pattern. They looked natural and blended in perfectly with the strokes in the middle. The scroll felt weighted and epic.

This scroll was nearly perfect.

After careful observation, Derek realized that the intricate pattern on the border was not just decorative, but was, in fact, an individual spell.

It was a Level-0 Basic Stabilizing Spell.

This would protect the scroll from any damages and the effects would last until the spell disintegrated.

If this scroll was bought as a collectible, the spell could greatly lengthen its lifespan and allow it to be passed on for many generations to come as a family heirloom.

"Perfect! Absolutely perfect! Link, you are really a genius!" Derek could not help but exclaim. He was initially afraid that Link could not perform up to his standards, but now he was completely at ease. These scrolls could definitely be sold for a high price.

Link acted uncomfortable and nodded, "Then I will be returning to my room."

"Wait...here's eight gold coins—your commission for the scrolls. Take them." Derek paid Link upfront. He was already sure that the scrolls could be sold for a high price.

Link received the gold coins and left the room after politely bowing to Derek.

"How gullible." Derek was extremely pleased with Link's performance.

Little did he know that Link was merely letting him get used to the convenience of such quick money. When he got used to this extravagant lifestyle the magic scrolls were providing him, he would have developed a dependence on Link. Currently, he was like a frog in a pot of warm water slowly brought to boil.

Chapter 92

An Offer You Can't Refuse

Ten days went by like a breeze, and Link had now produced 150 Protective Armor magic scrolls, of which more than half was in Derek's name. The military's orders of 800 magic scrolls were completed on schedule as well. Warwick could finally breathe easy now, and he was deeply grateful to Link.

Warwick had made some progress because of this experience too. After 20 days of intense work stretching his own limit by producing a huge number of magic scrolls, he had broken through his progress ceiling and became a full-fledged Level-1 Magician.

He had two options after becoming a full-fledged Magician. The first choice was to become an independent Magician who would go out and fight in battles, while the second was to continue to stay in the Mage Tower. Warwick opted for the first choice. Thus, there was a vacancy in the position of the person overseeing the production of magic scrolls.

Many apprentices were vying for the position as it came with a lot of perks and boons. Because Derek had the power to appoint anyone to the position, a swarm of apprentices waited at his feet ready to do anything for him. Some female apprentices even threw themselves into his arms and became especially affectionate to him. It was a time when Derek felt he was on top of the world, intoxicated by the unctuous taste of power.

However, on the twelfth day, Link suddenly came into Derek's room and handed him 15 exquisite magic scrolls.

"Mr. Derek, I want to be the head of the magic scroll production," he whispered.

"What?" Derek was alarmed. It was the first time Link had ever made any special demands. His instinct was to refuse him because he had promised the position to an apprentice named Evelyn. For the simple reason, that beautiful girl had promised to be his lover and she would give him whatever he wanted, whenever and wherever he wanted it.

His impulse to refuse Link was stunted by the sudden realization that Link's magic scrolls had earned him a fortune. Every day, he brought Link's magic scrolls with him to Springs City and sold them at the price of 10 gold coins each. Not only did they sell out every day, but people flocked to him looking for more of these marvelous scrolls. Link's magic scrolls turned out to be much more popular than he imagined. Moreover, the capital city was never in shortage of rich people.

In the last ten days, Link had brought him thousands of gold coins of income. It was an amount of money he wouldn't even dare to dream about in the past.

An hour in his tutor's Elemental Pool cost a princely sum of 100 gold coins, but that was not a problem to him anymore as he now had the money. With Link's magic scrolls he earned nearly a hundred gold coins a day, so he could afford to spend half an hour in the Elemental Pool every day. Because of that, he progressed rapidly and had now mastered a Level-2 spell, Large Fireball. Consequently, he was now a Level-3 Magician.

In the eyes of the Magicians, nothing was paramount to skills in magic. As a Level-3 Magician, his colleagues started to treat him with much more respect. This had given Derek far more satisfaction than any woman could through carnal pleasure.

"Don't worry about it," said Derek, "I've decided to appoint you as the man in charge of magic scroll production. I'll announce it publically tomorrow."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Derek," said Link, putting on a reverent tone. He then took out another magic scroll.

"I've recently mastered the Level-0 Light spell and made slight modifications to its structure to improve its aesthetics. This way people can use the spell as an ornament. I'm sure magic scrolls of this spell would sell much better than Lesser Protective Armor scrolls."

Although Derek showed no signs of being annoyed by Link's demand just now, he still wanted to make sure there were no hard feelings between them. The magic scroll was a present he prepared for Derek to sweeten the deal. But why did he not just offer the present before he made his demand?

Because Link wanted to send a message. He only presented the new magic scroll after Derek had agreed to appoint him to the position that Link desired – hinting that Link would repay him for whatever favor that was given to him. The more requests Derek

could satisfy, the more presents he would get.

Derek could sense the message Link was trying to give and it left a bad taste in his mouth—though he was determined not to show it since Link had the upper hand in the current situation. And so, Derek suppressed the nagging anger he felt and proceeded to unfold Link's new magic scroll.

Derek was startled the instant he opened the scroll, as he was faced with not just simple lines of magic runes, but a horse – a horse carved out by countless lines of flowing Mana that looked so real it seemed it might jump out of the scroll at any moment. What was even more striking was how the body of the horse was glowing and the combination of light and shadow conspired to make it look three-dimensional. The eyes of the horse seemed to shine vividly, they were exactly identical to those of a living breathing horse.

"What is it?" asked the stupefied Derek.

"It's a horse," said Link, "But it's also the structure of the Light spell. I've made some minute changes to enable it to display a more impressive and realistic contrast of light and shadow. I've also used a magic-preservation spell on it, so it should last for at least fifty years without fading."

Just as Link had explained, Derek could finally make out the outlines of the Light spell in the structure of the horse. But it was far from the ordinary version of the spell. Link had created something so innovative that no one else would be able to imitate!

Derek could already predict how well this magic scroll would be received in Springs City. Marvelous! I won't let these magic scrolls part my hands without getting paid 20 gold coins for each! thought Derek, full of determination.

Derek's lacking entrepreneurial skills were obvious from this idea. Any shrewd merchant would know that these scrolls could fetch at least a hundred gold coins each!

Of course, Link wouldn't reveal the fact to Derek even if he could hear Derek's current thoughts. After all, producing magic scrolls was, to him, just a way to get closer to Bale. Even if he wanted to start doing it seriously to earn money, he would do it later himself and would definitely not trust a cheapskate like Derek to handle things for him.

"I'll pay you three gold coins for each magic scroll like this," said Derek, pointing towards the scroll in front of him. His previous animosity towards Link had completely

vanished after seeing these magic scrolls.

"Thank you, Mr. Derek!" replied Link, not forgetting to put on a look of joy.

When Link left the room, Derek became lost in his train of thoughts. He now realized that Link was more than a simple Magician's Apprentice. He had a vague feeling that he was falling into a trap set by Link. But the problem was, he felt the trap was so alluring that he himself wasn't willing to escape, as it was brimming with gold coins. The ecstasy he felt from owning a mountain of gold coins that he could spend and squander however he wished was something he wouldn't let go of that easily, even if it meant that he was caught in somebody's trap.

"That damned kid, he's got me firmly in his hands!" cursed Derek. He then got up and left the room to find Emily. He had to appease his new lover.

Although he couldn't fulfill his promise to her, he knew the only reason she wanted the position was because she was attracted to the many perks that came with it. And now that he was in no shortage of gold coins, he was confident that she wouldn't stay angry with him for long.

What I wouldn't give to have that nice body of hers all to myself, thought Derek, now lost in his lustful fantasies. He was so eager to meet his lover that he failed to notice how Link had been observing his every move in a corner.

So he's resigned to his fate now, huh? Link could easily read Derek's thoughts just by watching his actions.

Derek was like a frog that Link trapped in a pot of cold water, to which he then increased the temperature so slowly that it would not notice any changes in its surroundings until it was too late. Figuratively speaking, Derek was now a boiled frog – no longer a threat or even a slight obstacle to Link.

Link then returned to his own little room. He didn't prepare any magic scroll or read any books. Instead, he started to work on his thesis.

The theories in Link's thesis were the basis of his modification of the spell Edelweiss, which he regarded as a great success. This made Link realize the enormous potential of his unfinished thesis, so he became more motivated to work on it now.

Today was quite a productive day for him. He had a lot of inspirations for new ways to

advance his flow of deductions. He had been working intensely for a full hour before he felt exhausted and unable to focus. Link saw no point in straining himself further, so he put down his quill and picked up a textbook instead.

Level-3 spells were still not strong enough for him. Link anticipated the day when the Ailing Mana effects subsided and his Mana would be as high as 1480 points, enough to cast Level-5 spells.

Still, the quality of the spells purchased from the gaming system was just too low. Not only was their power disappointing, the spellcasting speed was too slow as well, which rendered them completely useless in battles. Unless it was absolutely necessary, Link wouldn't waste any more of his Omni Points to purchase new spells from the gaming system. From now on, he would learn and master the spells through his own efforts.

Learning magic was a complicated business. As the theories got more convoluted and impenetrable, the slower Link had to pace himself through each point and each fact. Nevertheless, his progress had been slow but steady.

Time passed, and it was now the dead of night. But in the small space beneath the narrow staircase in Bale's Mage Tower, the young Magician was still hard at work.

Meanwhile, Derek was still busy fooling around with his new lover, the genius Magician Eliard had already gone to bed after a long day, and the angel Herrera was in her own Mage Tower, enjoying a moment of quiet solitude as she sipped at the sweet Dragon Wine imported from the South.

In a city of pleasure paradise called Mollendan in the Southern Free Trade Confederation, a dark-haired girl suddenly gazed up at the night sky. In a sea of bright flickering stars, a dazzling meteor swept across the heavens.

"How are you getting on right now, Link?" murmured the beautiful demon Princess into the chilly air. A gust of wind blew past her, and the girl pulled up the hood to cover her face as she slithered away quickly into the darkness. Behind her, pursuers kept trying to hunt her down.

Chapter 93

Give Me Ten Days

The next morning, Derek announced that Link would be in charge of magic scroll production with a gleeful look on his face.

He had climbed slightly higher in rank ever since he officially became a Level-3 Magician. Link had also displayed his talent in writing magic scrolls. Even Warwick, who was going to leave the Mage Tower, also suggested appointing Link as his successor.

Therefore, even with some objections on the ground, the appointment was relatively smooth sailing.

Warwick then handed over all his responsibilities to Link.

As Warwick explained the duties, Link realized two benefits that he would receive.

The first was a list of contacts he would be getting. He would be able to directly liaise with the magic scroll merchants without going through a third party. This would be extremely helpful in his future plans to earn more gold coins.

Secondly, he would be responsible for the purchase of raw materials in the creation of magic scrolls. This included the entire Mage Tower ranging from basic to high-level quality materials! Official Magicians were usually too prideful to concern themselves with errands like this. Hence, they often let trusted Magicians of lower status handle the job.

From these lists, Link could obtain a great deal of information about the Mage Tower.

After Warwick was done with the explanation, Link sat down and started reviewing the Mage Tower's previous purchases. They were recorded in great detail in a thick notebook.

He perused through the pages and found what he was looking for within minutes.

Warwick bought 30 Taric cow leather for a total of three times in the past 50 days. This type of leather was only used in the creation of magic scrolls Level-5 and above. However, the amount of Taric cow leather the Mage Tower was purchasing was nowhere near normal.

High-level magic scrolls required huge amounts of magic power and were extremely difficult to produce. A Level-6 Magician could only create one scroll a month. There was thus no need to purchase 30 of them every month.

If they were indeed used to create magic scrolls, there would be an insane number of high-level magic scrolls in Bale's Mage Tower. However, Bale clearly did not have the energy and time to create these scrolls.

Then why did Bale order so much Taric cow leather? Warwick might be clueless but Link was certain he knew what was going on.

The production of Taric cow leather took place in the Taric plains to the West. The leather came from a magical beast indigenous to the area. It was only termed as cow leather simply because of its looks, and had, in fact, no connection to cows.

These magical beasts had an affinity to water and were resistant to both droughts and floods. Their skin was mainly used to create high-quality scroll paper, though a certain substance could also be extracted from their skin. However, the latter was not known to many people and was rarely used.

This substance was known as Death Glue; it was widely used in undead magic to glue the different body parts together.

Despite the fact that Taric cow leather was already processed by alchemy, Death Glue could still be extracted from it!

He could only determine that Bale was experimenting with dark magic when he saw the Dormant Forest Spirit Root in Derek's room. However, with this evidence, he could narrow it down even further to determine that it was undead magic that Bale was experimenting with!

"Bale, do you really wish to attain immortality! What an idiot!" Link gently closed the book and sneered.

The only way to become immortal was to become a god! Any other path would

inevitably result in the annihilation of your soul.

That was, unless the war between dark and light ended in favor of the dark side and the world fell into the control of the Dark Gods. Only then would Necromancers have a chance to shine.

Bale clearly did not have the liberty of time to wait until then. He also could not tell what the future held. To think that he would abandon everything and walk on the path of darkness, much less trying to cover up his tracks with such juvenile tactics! How foolish!

Link tidied up his desk before informing Matt "I will be going out for an hour."

"Got it," Matt replied.

After all, they were not slaves and were allowed to freely move around the academy.

Link was careful. In order to not raise suspicion, he first brought the notebook back to his own room and hid it in his dimensional pendant. He then walked out of the Mage Tower barehanded and made a few rounds around the common square before stopping right in front of Herrera's Mage Tower.

He was granted a visit ten minutes later.

"I have found the evidence."

Link wasted no time and took out the notebook he was hiding in his dimensional pendant.

Herrera looked through the notebook and asked, "It looks perfectly normal, except for the excessive purchase of high-quality scroll raw materials. What does this mean?"

In the eyes of an ordinary Magician, undead magic was forbidden—one was not even allowed to be in contact with it, much less experiment on something so dangerous.

Even though knowing thy enemy was undoubtedly a good tactic, the temptation of undead magic is way too strong. This was especially so for those powerful, but old Magicians who found it difficult to resist the lure of immortality. Magicians thus had to completely ban the use of this magic.

Although Herrera was an awakened Angel of Light, her knowledge of magic was still limited to what she had learned during her time in the mortal realm. She hence had no knowledge of undead magic and was clueless to the alternative use of Taric cow leather.

This might be the reason why Bale was so daring in his purchase of undead magic raw materials.

Link pointed to the Taric cow leather purchases on the notebook and said, "This is the problem!"

"What about it? What is so special?" Herrera asked. Her eyes fixated on Link, puzzled as to what kind of problems Link could possibly have found.

Link was dumbfounded. Based on his knowledge, he should not know anything about undead magic. The fact that he was aware of such information only had one explanation, and that was he had once read a dark magic book.

That was absolutely not allowed.

Link immediately had an idea. He calmly explained the special use of Taric cow leather, the Death Glue and the fact that the glue could be extracted from the leather even after it was processed. He was extremely detailed.

As expected, Herrera asked, "How did you know about this?"

"The God of Light told me so." Link played his trump card.

"I see." Herrera bought his incredulous story!

If it were any other Magician, Link would have been shot down right on the spot. After all, who would believe such an incredulous story of a god bestowing knowledge onto a layman. However, Herrera was an Angel of Light and she firmly believed Link to be the Chosen One. There was nothing shocking for Divine Enlightenment to descend onto the Chosen One.

Herrera was still troubled. "But I cannot report it to Master Anthony. He knows that I have no knowledge of dark magic and will immediately suspect you. He does not believe in Divine Enlightenment."

Link had an idea. "That is easy, you can simply confront Bale and expose his secrets. Following which, he will be flustered, resulting in more mistakes and eventually, a solid evidence of his dark magic experiment will surface. The only downside to this plan was its risks. There was a high chance Bale may silence us for the success of his experiments."

Herrera simply laughed, "Kill me? That is impossible. My magic level might be lower, but he is definitely not my match."

The level of a Magician was usually taken with a pinch of salt in a battle. If a Level-1 Magician could cast his spells fast enough and had good battle awareness, he could easily pierce the heart of a powerful Magician with a Level-1 Ice Spike spell.

If Herrera was so confident, she must have a Supreme Magical Skill trump card in her hands.

"So what do you think?" Link asked.

"Time is tight, I will settle it now," Herrera agreed and grabbed her sapphire staff, prepared to confront Bale.

"Wait a minute," Link said.

"Is there an issue?"

"Can we wait for ten more days?" Link brought up a strange request.

"Why?" Herrera was confused.

"I will have recovered from my weakened state in five days, and I need another five more days to fully replenish my energy. By then, I will have enough power to aid you in the battle. Furthermore, we may find new evidence these next few days. What do you say?"

Even though Herrera was confident, she was still infringing on someone else's home turf. It was safer to travel with a trusted aide.

Herrera thought for a moment and nodded, "Alright, ten days it is."

Herrera was not an impulsive person. She had done her research into Link's

background and knew that he was a powerful Magician in battle. She would be way more confident with him around.

Chapter 94

Black Magic was No Laughing Matter

After leaving Herrera's Mage Tower, Link circled the grounds of Bryant's Inspiration Courtyard, making sure he seemed like he was just taking a walk as he always did.

Then, he walked back to Bale's Mage Tower as usual. But when he walked into the tower, he found that there was something different about the atmosphere in the hall.

It was eerily quiet, even the usual din of murmurs was missing. But Link looked around and saw that most of the apprentices were there, so what exactly was going on? Why was it so quiet?

Link then scanned around the hall more carefully and found the reason for the abnormal silence. Right there beside the semi-circular bookshelf was a white-haired old man dressed in a green robe.

The old man's face was full of wrinkles, his stature was very thin, and he must have been at least 70 years of age. The Mana on his body fluctuated in a very restrained manner, making him seem not very powerful at all, and yet Derek and Darris who stood near the old man both looked especially deferential when they addressed him.

That must be the Magician Bale! It was Link's first time seeing the disgraced Magician since entering the East Cove Magic Academy.

He looked much older than he did in the game. In fact, he even seemed weak and frail. His only outstanding features were his eyes which were a deep dark blue, and they exuded a mysterious aura that seemed capable of inadvertently striking terror into a weaker soul. This meant that the old man possessed a formidable power within that shell of a frail body.

His body might be old, but his magic was obviously still on point.

Bale was surrounded by many Magician's Apprentices who were posing questions to the official tutor of all apprentices in this Mage Tower. He wore a kind smile on his face while he patiently answered their questions.

Link hurried back to his room before anyone noticed him. Once in his room, he quickly put the record of purchases notebook on the nightstand.

Finding out that Link had smuggled the notebook out of the tower would certainly make Bale suspicious of Link, and that would mean disaster.

Barely a minute afterwards, someone knocked on his door.

"Link, come out. The tutor wants to see you."

It was Derek's voice.

Link was startled, but he managed to regain his composure quickly.

"I'll be out in a bit," replied Link in a loud and clear voice.

As he opened the door, Link saw how every pair of eyes in the hall turned to him. Many of those eyes betrayed signs of admiration and some, jealousy and envy. But there was one stark exception – Bale's chief disciple, Darris, who was standing right beside his tutor. His eyes were staring fixedly at Link with a clear expression of distrust.

Link found it curious since he clearly remembered that he hadn't been interacting much with the chief disciple, and yet, Darris seemed to be inexplicably resentful of him, as though they were sworn enemies.

I'll just be more careful around him, then. Link thought this wasn't the time to ruminate on such trivial matters.

Bale was watching him too, looking very interested in the young apprentice. When Link approached him, Bale greeted him amiably.

"Young man, I have seen your magic scrolls," said Bale, "They are indeed remarkable. I am honored to have such a talented young man as my apprentice in my twilight years. If you are willing, you may remain as my disciple in this tower once you've become a full-fledged Magician."

Just as those words left Bale's lips, the whole hall erupted into gasps and suppressed mutterings. No one admired Link now. Everyone had become envious of the lucky new apprentice—some even resented Link at this point.

Bale enjoyed a high reputation in the kingdom of Norton. He was widely respected as a veteran Master Magician among Magicians in the kingdom. Although these apprentices had been learning magic in Bale's tower, they've never actually been taught by Bale himself. And yet, who would've thought that this newcomer Link would suddenly be noticed by the tutor and was even invited to stay on after becoming a full-fledged Magician by the man himself? Some apprentices found it simply unacceptable and unfair.

What aggravated the matter was the fact that Link's own Mana strength was so low. Had he been accepted by the tutor because of his strength, they would've conceded to the decision. But all Link could do was create beautiful magic scrolls!

If Link's innate Mana wasn't strong enough, while he might be able to become a full-fledged Magician, he would never be able to rise above Level-2. What was so impressive about producing nice-looking magic scrolls when he was stuck at being a Level-2 Magician? Why would Bale take notice of such a weakling?

Even so, none of the apprentices dared to voice their displeasure. It was Bale's Mage Tower after all, so his words were the law. No one had the guts to challenge any of Bale's decisions.

Even Link himself was shocked by Bale's announcement. He never thought that such a thing would happen. As he looked up his eyes were met with Bale's own extraordinary pair. For a few moments, both were staring deep into each other's eyes.

Link's eyes were deep and impenetrable, while Bale's eyes were naturally emitting a dignified aura. In the brief moment that they made eye contact, their different spiritual forces inadvertently collided.

Seconds later, Link lowered his eyes and with a joyful expression said, "Thank you, tutor!"

Bale blinked unwittingly, and his brows were slightly raised.

He had decided to accept the young apprentice as his disciple because he was impressed by his extraordinary magic scrolls. Compared to the other apprentices, Link's skill in creating magic scrolls was indeed spectacular. However, what had really caught Bale's eyes was Link's masterful control of Mana, especially after hearing how Link could engage in such an intense activity as producing magic scrolls for many days

in a row.

Being able to tirelessly produce magic scrolls for many consecutive days proved that Link possessed a powerful soul, and this was one of the essential qualities of a great Magician.

Link's weak Mana was not a problem at all because he was still very young. Bale believed that there will be a great development in his innate Mana in the future. Throughout history, there had been numerous great talents who were late bloomers, so a case like Link was not an uncommon one.

Although it was true that the old man had started to delve into the dark art of black magic, his original intention had only been to lengthen his own life. Bale was not an evil man at all. When he discovered a way to guarantee an excellent afterlife for himself, he was naturally delighted, and wanted to find out precisely how he could attain it.

However, after looking into Link's dark pair of eyes, Bale couldn't help but feel a little bit unnerved. He was now sure that Link's soul was very powerful, but in that brief interaction, he'd found that Link's soul might be so powerful that even he could be overwhelmed by its immense force.

It simply made no sense how such a powerful soul could possess such a weak level of Mana!

Bale had to satisfy his curiosity, so he carefully observed Link again and again. Yet Link never showed the same fierce power he did before and he was now just a normal reverent apprentice no matter how many times Bale examined him.

Was I just imagining it? Bale wondered.

In the past, Bale wouldn't let such trivial thoughts linger on in his mind. He wouldn't bat a second eye to it and would completely forget it in a matter of seconds. But those were simpler times when he had nothing to hide.

He couldn't afford to be so carefree now because he was now plagued by a guilty conscience. He was concealing a terrible secret that he couldn't let anyone find out. Therefore, any minute details that were out of place would trigger his suspicion nowadays.

I was too reckless just now, Bale thought. I should've checked the apprentice's background more thoroughly before I make any hasty decisions.

Because of the unruly doubts in Bale's mind fueled by his dark secrets, his readiness to accept Link as his new disciple had been cut in half.

Bale did not realize that although he had dipped his toes into black magic with the initial intention of extending his life, the insidious nature of black magic was no laughing matter. It had planted three treacherous demons in Bale's heart: Constant Doubt, Fear of Exposure, and Eternal Greed.

Under the efforts of these three demons, the qualities he possessed in the Realm of Light rapidly collapsed without him knowing it.

Then, Bale seemed to forget what he had just said. His attitude toward Link changed drastically and he stopped talking to him completely. He stayed in the hall for a while longer, doing and saying nothing.

After a while he suddenly turned to Darris, one of his most trusted disciples, and said, "I'm tired now. Let's go back upstairs. When you're free later, tell Link to move out from his room and arrange for him to stay in a new room on the second floor."

"Yes, tutor," replied Darris respectfully.

Bale then stood up, and Darris hurriedly stepped forward to support his tutor's body. They then headed for the stairs and climbed up to the top of the Mage Tower.

"Darris, what do you think of Link?" asked Bale suddenly. They'd reached the third floor and no one else was around.

"I don't know much about him," answered Darris, "He used to be very quiet, and his progress had been average. Had it not been for the military's order for magic scrolls, I wouldn't have known that he had such a great talent for magic scrolls. I hear Derek is close to him, so he should know more about Link than I do." Darris gave a very objective response to the question and he made sure not to mix in any of his personal feelings.

But Bale knew his disciple very well. When he heard Darris's tone as he spoke of Link, his face crumpled into a frown.

"So you don't like him, huh?" asked the Master Magician.

Chapter 95

Threats from the Chief Disciple

Bale's Mage Tower

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Darris looked at the ground and shook his head, "No, Link is an exceptional apprentice, it's just...too sudden. Master, I do not know how to explain this feeling of abruptness...it is almost as if this was deliberately planned."

"Deliberate? Planned?" These two words struck fear into Bale's heart. Many images flashed through his mind.

Could it be that someone has discovered my secret? Link was recommended by my old friend Duke Abel, there should not be a problem...but Darris' sixth sense had always been accurate. If he sensed that something was amiss, the chances were that he was right.

After a few moments of silence, Bale spoke, "Since I have decided to take Link as my disciple, I have the right to better understand his background. Help me do some research and report back to me as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," Darris nodded, "If there is indeed a problem, what should I do?"

Bale listened and shook his head, "Report to me before you do anything. Do not act rashly."

Darris then escorted Bale back to his room and immediately returned to the ground floor to look for Link.

"Let's go, I'll bring you to your new room." Darris was cold towards Link.

"Okay." Link nodded and followed closely behind.

Under the envious vision of all the other Magician's Apprentices, the two of them

climbed up the swirling stairs and stopped in front of the outermost room on the second floor.

Darris did not open the door immediately, but instead, stood in front of the door and stared at Link, "Link, there are many secrets in this world, but we do not have to know all of them, especially those that will not cause harm to others, am I right?"

Link was shocked at Darris' awareness of his secretive actions but he still managed to keep his cool.

He replied with a confused tone, "Sir, I don't understand what you are talking about."

Darris sniggered and lowered his voice, "You know exactly what I am talking about. I know the notebook that is used to record purchases of raw materials for magic scrolls is missing. After asking around, I realize you are the one that is in charge of keeping it safe. I also know that you got this position in return for writing magic scrolls for Derek. You probably have a motive, going to such means to get what you want. You must be investigating on my master, and shall I make a guess that you have already found some evidence?"

Link looked at Darris, clearly bewildered and at a loss for words.

When Link found the evidence in the notebook, he was sneering at Bale's failure to cover up his tracks. The sensitivity and accuracy of Darris accusations was thus something he did not expect.

Link looked as though he was frozen in time.

"Please let this go. My master has not fallen, and he will never cause harm to others." Darris stared hard at Link with a slight murderous intent. He seemed ready to engage in a fight if Link were to refuse.

The real reason why Darris was able to pinpoint Link's intentions so accurately was purely coincidental. Link had been performing exceptionally well amongst the apprentices and had caught his attention from a while ago. Darris was thus observing him with keen interest.

However, Link's consistent exceptional performance turned his curiosity into vigilance. This was especially so after Link became the person in charge of magic scroll production.

Darris was fully aware of Bale's experiments into black magic. He was, in fact, a competent assistant to his master.

Bale was getting old and did not have as much vigor as before. When he was fully focused on his research, he often failed to cover up the tracks of his ventures into the area of black magic. On the other hand, Darris was young and vigilant. He knew very well that the notebook definitely held evidence of his master's experiments.

If anyone were to express interest in the contents of that notebook, there was a high chance that he was here to investigate on his master. Darris was only surprised that the person tasked with such a dangerous mission was of such tender age and had little to no magic powers.

While Darris was sorting out his thoughts, Link had also figured out the episodes that could have ignited Darris' suspicion. Darris might have been right about his intentions, however he lacked concrete evidence to prove it. Before then, it could only be dismissed as a conjecture.

This also meant that Darris' views could still be easily changed by what he saw and felt.

Link hence decided to stay true to his original statement, "Sir Darris, I still do not understand."

"I truly hope so. I was an orphan and it was Master Bale who raised me as a child and taught me magic. He is like a father to me! Anyone who tries to hurt my master will have to first step over my dead body!" Darris was extremely confident that Link was a spy.

Darris called out his Light Green Rune Staff and a warm glow enveloped the tip of his staff. Before long, the corridors were shaking and getting distorted; it felt as though they were in the midst of a heat wave. This was the power of a Level-4 Magician.

If an ordinary Magician's Apprentice were to witness this scene, he would be petrified with fear. However, Link had way too much battle experience for this tactic to be effective. He knew, for one, that he could not let this confrontation develop into an all-out battle.

It would be for the best if a Master Magician like Bale dabbling in the arts of black magic was settled quietly.

Link thus had to find a way to stabilize Darris' emotions and convince him that his conjecture was incorrect. As long as Darris started to doubt himself, he would be able to buy more time to react to this unexpected confrontation.

Link hence put on an act to be traumatized by Darris' display of magic power. He made sure to tremble while slightly stammering, "Sir Darris, I understand. I will definitely remember your words. Also, I am really not investigating anything. The notebook has always been in my room, if you want to take a look I can always pass it to you."

Link had a fearful and dazed expression when speaking. He looked like he was clueless about what was happening.

"You are a smart person," Darris nodded.

Link seemed genuine enough. He might have really made a mistake by accusing Link of such an act. After all, Link might just be a talented Magician making detailed plans for his future.

"Pass me the notebook now." Darris would erase all evidence.

Link immediately ran to his old room to retrieve the notebook.

After receiving the notebook, Darris spoke sternly, "No one has to know about what happened today, understand?"

"Yes, I totally understand." Link nodded hastily.

"That's good. Now please enjoy staying in your new room." Darris pushed the door open and handed the room key to Link.

Link took the key and ran off swiftly. He looked terrified.

Darris started to believe he could have been misguided. Link might really just be an ordinary apprentice. However, there was no way he could continue staying in this Mage Tower after what happened today.

He had to find a way to get him out.

And the moment he leaves...Darris' eyes shone with a bladed resolve.

"The secret must be safe! Master is getting old and way too kind. Certain things require a clean break." Darris would take no chances. If his master's reputation went down the drain, so would his future.

Chapter 96

Playing with Fire

In Bale's Mage Tower.

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After receiving threats from Darris, Link made sure to keep under the radar and did nothing that might arouse suspicions.

In recent days, he did not interact with anyone, nor did he even contact Herrera and Eliard. Instead he stayed cooped up in his room all day and all night, ostensibly to prepare magic scrolls.

He'd been consistently producing 15 first-rate magic scrolls a day, and all of them were handed to Derek to manage. He got three gold coins for each of them, thus earning 45 gold coins a day.

From the sales of magic scrolls alone, Link had so far earned nearly 300 gold coins. But wealth wasn't the only thing he gained recently.

Because he didn't have to worry about his safety once he was inside the academy, coupled with the adequate nutrition he got every day, the regular intervals of work and rest and his young age, Link had now also gained considerable weight. He no longer seemed so frail and thin, but had actually grown quite muscular, nicely filling out the tall and lanky stature that he had previously. All in all, Link now looked more pleasing to the eye than he ever did.

And so, five days passed with no incidents.

On the fifth morning, Link felt his body was completely rejuvenated to a point where he felt he was at a different plane of existence. His consciousness and perceptions had now become unusually acute.

He could even hear the spider weaving its web in the corner of the room and the whistling breeze blowing through the window. He could feel the various elements

flowing in the air so vividly he could almost see it with his naked eye.

These were the effects of Elemental Sight. It was an ability that a Magician naturally developed once their power advanced to a certain extent.

Check body statistics. Once the thought emerged in his mind, there was a flash on the interface.

Link Morani (Nobleman)

Level-3 Elite Magician

Rate of Mana Restoration: 5 Points per hour.

Maximum Mana: 660 points.

Current Mana: 150 points.

Weapon: Matchstick Wand.

Current Status: Ailing Mana effects subsiding.

Just as I expected! After three long months, the Ailing Mana effects were finally going to be over.

The process of the Ailing Mana effects subsiding would last a full day, and in every hour, Link's Maximum Mana would gradually become higher and higher.

However, because his Mana restoration rate was so slow, his Mana could only recover 9.8 points per hour even under ideal conditions. So even though his Maximum Mana was continuously increasing, his Mana still needed more time to catch up, so he had to be patient and not do anything rash.

At eight o'clock in the evening, the Ailing Mana effects finally disappeared completely.

By then, Link's Maximum Mana was at 1480 points, and his current Mana was at 220 points. In order to completely restore his strength, Link had to wait more than 130 hours, which was more than five days.

My Mana restoration speed is too damn sluggish, Link lamented.

He knew that a Magician with decent Mana strength and talents would only need a day of absolute rest to completely replenish their Mana, yet he needed six long days to do the same. He realized that his Mana restoration rate was the biggest stumbling block to his progress.

Link was carefully considering the best strategies to take while lying in his bed. Finally, he chose to spend his Omni Points, which were currently at 125 points.

70 Omni Points to increase the Mana Restoration rate, he silently thought.

Then, a dialogue box popped up on the interface.

Confirm?

Confirm, replied Link.

Suddenly, Link felt a heat rising from inside his body. It felt as if something had exploded. Soon after the initial burst, a stream of heat then flowed rapidly to his extremities and he felt numb in every spot that was touched by the heat. Moments afterwards, the numbness turned into stinging pain and then the stinging pain morphed into excruciating pain. The pain was so unbearable that Link couldn't hold in his groans and beads of sweat began to form on his forehead, which then dripped down his face in streams.

What was going on? Link was petrified. He had only chosen to increase his Mana Restoration speed, so why was he suffering such a frightening level of pain? Nothing like this had ever happened before.

Then, a notification popped up on the interface. It was an explanation from the gaming system.

Player's choice has exceeded the Innate Talent limit of the physical body. Gaming system is currently modifying player's physical body to accommodate the new changes.

Innate Talent limit? Link had never heard of the term before.

The gaming system then provided a vivid metaphor to explain.

The physical body is like a bucket and Mana is like the water inside it. There is an inlet

and an outlet on the bucket, and the limit for the physical body's inlet is 30 Mana points per hour, while the outlet's limit is 500 Mana points per hour. The moment these limits are exceeded, the system must modify the bucket to adapt to the current changes, and this process can cause pain to the player.

Link got it now.

Looking at the data that the gaming system just provided, Link's body must have had a pretty low Innate Talent limit. Link estimated that it wouldn't have been possible for him to rise any higher than Level-5.

At present, a Level-5 Magician might sound impressive, but in the future when there was a drastic increase in the concentration of Mana in the environment, a Level-5 Magician was nothing more than a mediocre Magician.

Strength always came with its own price. Since there was no other way to advance other than to transform this body, Link had no other choice but to grit his teeth and endure the pain.

It felt as if there were countless blades of knives stabbing him from within. His body was trembling madly in response to the pain, yet Link sunk his teeth into his blanket and suffered through the pain without making a peep of sound.

The ordeal went on for more than four hours, and when those blades finally stopped stabbing, Link was soaking in sweat and he came very close to collapsing. Still, he managed to cast a Cleaning spell on his body, then he took some snacks that Lucy had prepared for him out from his storage pendant. After filling his stomach, Link then went to bed and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

The next moment he came to, it was already dawn.

Once he opened his eyes, Link clearly felt the surging Mana in his body.

His Maximum Mana was now 1480 points, and his Mana Restoration rate was now 79.8 points per hour. He checked his pocket watch and found out that he had slept for 15 hours, so his Mana must be full by now.

Right now, if Link didn't suppress a portion of his Mana, there would be a frightening flux of Mana around his body that would rival even the one that Darris emanated!

Finally, he could once again cast the Level-4 spell Flame Blast that he purchased in Gladstone a few months ago.

Link rose from the bed and changed into a brand new gray robe. He cast a Mirror spell and used it to tidy up his appearance. Then, Link walked out of his room with a strong resolve in his mind.

It was 10 o'clock this morning and when he reached the first floor, Link saw the simple and honest Matt hard at work preparing a magic scroll as usual.

"Matt, I'm going out for a while," said Link casually.

"Uh huh," replied Matt, more as a reaction than a response. He was still focused on his magic scroll. He must not be distracted or else the magic scroll in his hands would turn into trash.

Link left the Mage Tower and headed straight towards the Glory Square near the gates of the academy. There, he then hailed a carriage.

"To River Cove town, please," he said, after paying the coachman handsomely.

Magician's Apprentices were required to present their tutor's permission letter before they could leave the academy. Link had brought with him a permission letter that Herrera had prepared for him previously.

The coachman glanced at the letter, then eagerly received the gold coins and swiftly struck his whip. Very soon after, the carriage started to move and left the gates of the East Cove Magic Academy.

Link was going to fetch the Domingo crystal. A month's time had passed, and the crystal was now purified and ready to be used again.

Once he acquired the crystal, he would then possess a combative strength that no ordinary Magician could even dream of.

...

Meanwhile, in Bale's Mage Tower.

...

Shortly after Link left, Darris went to the main hall on the first floor. He had just got back from outside and he looked anxious and hurried, as if some emergency had occurred.

As soon as he reached the hall, he walked straight to the group of apprentices who were preparing magic scrolls. Coincidentally it was Matt that he approached.

"Where's Link?" Darris demanded.

Matt was jolted out of his deep concentration as he was working on the most critical structure of the magic scroll. He stared helplessly as the magic scroll that he had spent so much effort on failed before his eyes. He was so devastated he was about to cry, and yet he dared not raise his voice or lose his temper with Darris.

"He went out," answered Matt in a deflated tone.

"Out? Where did he go?"

"He didn't say."

"Damn it!" spat Darris, before rushing out of the tower in a flurried state.

These past few days, Darris had been snooping around to dig out as much information as he could about Link. The more he knew of the young apprentice, the more worried he got. Link was beyond any doubt a spy who was sent to investigate his tutor, Bale. Moreover, this kid was no ordinary Magician's Apprentice, but was in fact a Level-2 Magician!

He looked for Link everywhere until he finally got to the stable near the Square of Glory. He found a coachman, then pointed his wand at his heart and coldly asked, "There was a young Magician leaving the academy just now. Do you know where he was headed?"

This coachman was so afraid he was nearly out of breath, but in the end he managed to answer, "Yes, yes, I remember him. He said he was heading to River Cove town!"

Darris then climbed into the carriage.

"To River Cove town, then. And make it quick!" he barked at the coachman.

This was his best chance to eliminate Link now that he was out in the Girvent Forest. It wasn't an uncommon thing for a lone Magician's Apprentice to be robbed and killed in such a place where rogues and bandits lurked behind every bush.

You are bold for a Level-2 Magician! Don't you know that you're playing with fire?

Darris knew that the situation was now approaching the boiling point. He was sure that Link had sneaked out to the River Cove town to report on his tutor's secrets and expose everyone involved. Darris must do whatever it took to stop him!

Chapter 97

Cultivate Your Strength

The Girvent Forest was still as inviting and peaceful as ever. The warm sun rays that shone through the dense overgrowth gently caressed all the souls of the living passing through.

After a period of deceit and vigilance living in Bale's Mage Tower, Link felt exceptionally invigorated by the bright and tranquil Girvent Forest. Everything he saw pleased his eyes— even the suspicious people he saw and believed to be bandits. He ignored them and continued on his journey. The carriage reached River Cove Town after an hour.

River Cove Town was still as crowded and harmonious as before. There were people experiencing hangovers right outside the hotel, the market was packed with people, and the town hall notice board still had a bunch of notices posted all over it. The house of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries lay right at the corner of the town.

The yard looked different. It covered a larger surface area now, and had a lot more wooden houses at its side. Another yard enclosed by a wooden fence had also been built in the forest behind their original yard.

Their home was a lot more crowded than before. Faces unfamiliar to Link could be seen entering their home. A flag had also been erected at the entrance, depicting a picture of a soaring flamingo.

Lucy had been writing to inform him of the situation back at home. Link knew that the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries had been recruiting. They had already gotten more than 20 new members into their band.

The carriage stopped right in front of the house and attracted the attention of many onlookers. After all, it was not every day that you could see a carriage bearing the crest of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy arriving in River Cove Town. They were all expecting to see an old Magician walking out of the carriage.

Link had grown during his time at the Mage Tower and no longer looked as frail as

before. He was wearing a brand new robe and with a staff in his hand, he looked just like an official Magician.

Link and Lucy had already been drawn out of the house by the crowd of onlookers.

"Why did you return without informing us?" Lucy was slightly surprised. She took a good look at Link and was relieved. It seemed like life in the Mage Tower had been kind to him.

"I came back to pay a visit. Hey, is this young girl a new member too?" The first person that caught Link's attention when he walked into the yard was a beautiful young girl practicing her archery skills.

A young girl with flawless skin and delicate features would definitely stand out when placed within a group of burly men. She had mediocre archery skills. However, she was indeed blessed with good looks, like a flower waiting for its time to bloom.

Gildern laughed, "I was telling you, my lord would definitely notice out little Rylai when he comes back." He then proceeded to introduce the background of the young girl.

"Rylai is from the Southern Free Districts. She was brought here by the slave vendors and was actually bound for Hot Springs City. Lucy took pity on her and bought her from the slave vendor. You have no idea how much this girl cost us. One hundred gold coins! How expensive!"

Gildern was obviously displeased that such a fortune was spent on a young girl. If not for her good looks, he would never have agreed to let Lucy purchase her. They were not Samaritans with a lot of money to spare, but merely mercenaries who were working hard to get a good life.

Lucy was embarrassed. She knew that 100 gold coins was not a small amount and looked at Link uneasily, afraid that she would be told off. When she first saw Rylai in the market, her instinctive reaction was to immediately save her from her cruel fate.

Lucy could almost see the shadows of her past on Rylai's expression. She was certain that the young girl would end up as a concubine of a rich perverted old man in Hot Springs City if she did not intervene. The young girl might be favored by the man for a short while, but the moment the old man got tired of her looks, there was no knowing what would happen to her.

Lucy thought about the similar encounters she had previously and shuddered. She could not bear to let this innocent young girl suffer the same fate. Hence, she disregarded the consequences and helped her almost immediately when she knew she had the ability to. She did not regret her decision.

To everyone's surprise, the smile on Link's face only grew wider. He ignored their incessant chatters and circled around the young girl, observing her from head to toe with an almost invasive gaze.

Gildern could not help but scratched his nose and whispered to Lucy, "I think Link likes this girl."

From the moment he met Link, Link had never shown any interest in women. This held true even for Lucy, who had good looks and a voluptuous body. However, it seemed that Link was just waiting for the right person.

Lucy felt a wave of jealousy overwhelming her and harshly rebutted, "Shut your mouth!"

Rylai was extremely nervous. She knew that Link was a Magician and judging from the respectful way everyone treated him, he was definitely the leader of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries!

She stopped her archery training the moment she noticed Link's presence. She held the small wooden bow with her pale white hands, hanging her head low and averting direct eye contact with Link. She was like a frightened and confused deer awaiting the judgment of fate.

After observing for a full minute, Link even started touching the young girl! He first gently touched her forehead, before moving on to the arms and back. He even unapologetically felt her legs and hips. Link's actions looked extremely perverted. Furthermore, he had a strange expression on his face.

Gildern was at a loss for words. My lord is acting weird today. Was the lack of the opposite gender in the Magic academy too much for him to bear?

Meanwhile, Lucy thought, my lord is not this type of person, he must have found something! I have always thought Rylai was special! That was also another reason why Lucy was so insistent on purchasing Rylai.

Rylai was now on the verge of tears, and did not dare to even budge. When Link's finger made contact with her body, she felt a certain force entering her body as well. This made her extremely uncomfortable, but she was too petrified to move away.

Finally, Link withdrew his hand and nodded, "Lucy, your money was well spent. This girl has great magic potential."

Gildern's eyes widened in shock. Humans with magic potential were extremely rare—to think that Lucy was so lucky!

After rationalizing for a moment, Gildern concluded, "Well, only special individuals are born with such pretty features. Lucy, you have good judgment!"

"Really? I only thought she was slightly special." Lucy was elated.

It was not worthwhile to purchase a beautiful young girl for 100 gold coins, but to purchase a talented child with magic potential for that amount of money—that was a bargain.

Link nodded. Lucy had a bit of magical flair herself as well, that was perhaps why she found Rylai special.

Originally, Link was planning to teach Lucy magic. However, Lucy was already 28 years old and had no interest in the complex and dry magic theories. On the other hand, Rylai looked no older than 15 years old, the perfect age for someone to pick up magic. She also had more potential than Lucy—this was fate.

The moment Link saw Rylai at the corner of the yard, he was amazed at the number of water elementals surrounding her. She seemed to have a body that naturally attracted water element particles causing her surroundings to be filled with 50% more elemental energy.

Link was also not taking advantage of Rylai when he started touching her body. He was using Mana Detection to look into the elemental gates in her body. He realized that water elementals naturally existed in her elemental gates and that in every gate there were flowing streams of natural Mana.

This was exceptional talent for water elemental magic. If he successfully imparted his knowledge to this young girl, she would turn out to be an amazing Magician with a niche in water elemental magic.

As they continued on their journey, they would only meet stronger opponents. In their last battle, Link was already struggling to perform as the only Magician of the group. He had long wanted to recruit another talented Magician. Hence, he decided to take Rylai as a disciple.

"You shall be my main disciple," Link chuckled.

At that moment, another carriage pulled up at the entrance of River Cove Town. Darris alighted from the carriage.

"You may return," Darris signaled the carriage to leave. He then cast an Illusion Spell on himself to disguise as a traveler, asking any passerby he could find, "Hi, I am looking for Magician Link, do you know where he is?"

Darris had done his research. Link seemed to be slightly famous around this area; most of River Cove Town should have heard of his name.

"What a coincidence, he just returned from the magic academy and is currently at the house of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries."

Darris got the exact location after asking the third person. "Thank you," Darris nodded.

He did not go straight to the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries. His research had revealed that there was no one stronger than Link in that group. The mastermind that instructed Link to spy on his master could not have been there.

More importantly, he could not start a fight with Link in the middle of River Cove Town. That had way too many implications. If he were asked to explain his actions to the academy, he would be at a loss for words.

I will strike during your return trip to the academy.

Darris walked along the King's Lane for five miles before hiding himself in the overgrowth. His plan was simple. He would catch Link alive and force him to reveal the mastermind behind this investigation.

Darris naturally expected Link to resist. However, Link was merely a Level-2 Magician. He would utterly crush him with his Level-4 spells.

Chapter 98

The Turning Point of a Girl's Fate (1)

That day, he stretched out his hand and pulled me out of the swamps of my fate – Frost Queen Rylai Gassling.

At the Flamingo Band of Mercenary's headquarters.

...

Link was naturally unaware that he was dragged into someone's secret schemes. In this cabin, he was surrounded by loyal followers who all respected him and even revered him, so he let his guard down completely here.

Upon noticing that the beautiful girl was so frightened that she couldn't move a muscle, Link used Magician's Hand to gently take the small wooden bow from her hands and place it on a weapon shelf near him. Then, he took out a short wooden stick that was engraved with a web of silver magic runes.

It was a basic wand and it could enhance the power of spells by about 20%. He had created it from scratch when he first started learning the art of enchantment.

Link then handed the wand to the stunned girl.

"A bow and arrow doesn't suit you," he told her, "From today onwards, you'll learn magic with me."

The girl was in awe. Her bright eyes suddenly widened to the size of saucers; she couldn't believe what she just heard.

Rylai stared at the wand that Link handed her but didn't dare stretch her hand out to reach it.

"My lord, is it true?" the girl heard herself saying, her voice as quiet as a mosquito.

Learning magic required a lot of money—only the aristocrats had the resources

needed to do it. She never imagined that one day a mighty Magician would be willing to accept her as a disciple and give her a wand as soon as they met.

It's a real magic wand!

When she was nine-years-old, her father had taken her to the Southern Free Paradise of Mollendan. There, they passed by a shop run by a Magician. At that moment, the young Rylai gazed into the shop, only to see a well-dressed Magician arranging a pile of golden coins into neat rows on the table. There must've been more than 30 gold coins there, yet the only thing he bought was a single magic scroll.

Her father had seen it too, and she remembered how he had turned away from the sight of such unimaginable wealth in regret and sorrow.

This incident had left a deep impression on her young mind. Since then, she had assumed that all things related to magic were settled in gold coins. She was born in an ordinary trader's family; it was impossible for someone like her to reach such heights.

In fact, her father had once told her that even the cheapest magic wands cost more than 50 gold coins. Their family's income, even at their most prosperous, was no more than 15 gold coins a year.

And yet, right now, this strange man with a gentle smile on his face had offered to teach her magic and give her an expensive wand. It was all so incredible that she had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

"Take it. It belongs to you now," Link insisted.

The beautiful girl was as timid as a rabbit, so Link made sure he spoke only in the gentlest tone to her and even remembered to put on a smile. He then placed the wand into the girl's hands.

As he did so, he noticed how even her hands were so delicate and lovely. Each of her fingers was as long and slender like the green tops of a spring onion. Her hands were so fair and so soft that Link felt sorely tempted to hold them in his own and caress them gently.

Such a lovely girl—how could she not be famous in the game? Link wondered.

But when he thought of it, he could understand why the girl wouldn't appear in the

game at all. Had it not been thanks to Lucy's intervention, she would have been sold to a rich man in Springs City as a slave. The beautiful yet completely powerless girl would be treated as the rich merchants' goods that could be bought and sold by anyone who was willing to pay the price. Link was sure that the girl wouldn't survive such a life for long, though, and she would've died after two or three years and end up buried in someone's garden with no name to her grave.

Rylai herself still couldn't believe that any of this was true. Link's assurance had finally given her the courage and though she hesitated for a while, she finally closed her hand around the wand. The moment the wand touched her hand, she felt an inexplicable affinity to it and she clasped the wand to her bosom as if embracing an old friend.

In her eyes, this ordinary wand was as powerful as a king's scepter. Her body trembled slightly and she tried her best to hold the wand steadily in her hand. The wand was light and the runes on it glowed in a mysterious aura. This was a fateful moment in her life, as she was about to take her first step into the mysterious world of magic.

A month ago, her parents were killed and she was taken by the slave traders to the North. She felt that her whole world had collapsed. She thought of her father day and night and she often secretly shed tears for her own miserable destiny. She had lost all hope then.

But two weeks ago, Lucy had rescued her and brought her here. It was as if the glorious Lord of Light had given her a blessing after suffering a harsh fate. She began to practice archery in the hope of becoming a mighty mercenary and one day, she hoped she would seek vengeance for her parents.

But ever since her infancy, she had been cherished and brought up tenderly and lovingly by her parents. She never had to do anything that would require her to exert any energy, so her body had always been very weak. She was only strong enough to handle the smallest bow. Although she practiced hard every day until the skin on the palms of her hands peeled and her shoulder was so sore she couldn't raise her arm, her progress was still negligibly small.

If it hadn't been for Lucy, she might now be the lowest maid in the household. But she couldn't rely on Lucy forever. She resolved that if she was unable to develop any strength that would be useful to the group, she would concede to be a maid or a servant. Then she would bury all her dreams of strength and revenge.

But just as she felt very confused about the future, she was bestowed with a chance to learn powerful magic. She did not know how to describe her luck.

Link laughed and joked as he usually did, as if he'd done nothing special at all.

"I'm hungry. Is lunch ready yet?" he asked Lucy.

"One moment, my lord," said Lucy in a warm tone.

She then went into the kitchen. Now that Link was back, she wanted to prepare the food for him herself.

Under the respectful gaze of each new member, Link walked into the cabin, but after walking a few steps, he turned back and waved his hand and said to the girl, "Let's go, kid."

Rylai was nervously picking at her lips, but as soon as she heard Link's voice, her body seemed to automatically follow his orders and she quickly got up and followed Link's footsteps.

He's the master who will teach me magic; I must follow him closely, thought the girl.

Rylai didn't mind how Link called her a kid at all, and neither did anyone else in the mercenary band. Although Link himself looked to be about 17 or 18 years old, but his strength was clear to everyone there. All of them looked up to Link regardless of their age.

Meanwhile, Link was talking to Gildern in the cabin.

"Where's Jacker?" he asked.

"Someone found some information about the Cliff of Howling Winds," answered Gildern, "So he went with them to check it out. He should be back after three days."

"Oh, good." Link didn't worry about Jacker's safety. He was a level-4 Warrior and he had magic gear with him. He even had the experience of fighting against a Magician. So even if he did encounter Felidia, Link was sure that Jacker could retreat safely and come back in one piece.

Then it was time for lunch. The food was so delicious that Link savored each bite.

Once he was full, Link turned to Rylai who was still very tense.

"I want to rest for a while," he told her, "Come and find me in my room two hours from now."

"Yes, my lord," replied the girl, nodding earnestly.

"No, don't address me as 'my lord'," corrected Link, gently tapping his wand on the girl's smooth forehead, "From today onwards, I shall be your magic tutor." Link wore a gentle smile on his face and had a warmth in his tone when he was speaking to Rylai.

"Yes... tutor," Rylai responded, she was beginning to open up to Link. She glanced up at Link's face and saw that her tutor was a very young man who couldn't be more than a few years older than her. Although he wasn't strikingly handsome, his dark eyes were clear and very enigmatic. Rylai thought they looked like a pair of black diamonds.

Suddenly she realized that she was rudely staring at Link for too long, so she quickly lowered her head while the exquisite face of hers blushed in embarrassment.

Chapter 99

The Turning Point of a Girl's Fate (2)

The young girl was humble and respectful. These were two of the most important traits of a good disciple.

Link was content and went back to his room. Following which, he used a Shaping spell to unseal the path to the attic and retrieve his Domingo Crystal that was laying in the clear vat of water.

After a month, the Domingo Crystal had been completely purified and looked just like a transparent prism.

However, that was all. There was nothing out of the ordinary about its looks. No one would imagine that this was a Legendary tool that could make any Magician go insane.

"Ha, I guess true beauty lies on the inside." Link was extremely pleased.

Link then began to cast a Glass Orb spell. Through the use of this spell, he was able to concentrate the fire elementals in the surroundings. He then transferred the accumulated magical energy into the Domingo Crystal, causing the crystal to glow in a dreamy white light.

Link stopped short of releasing the glass orb, gradually accumulating fire elemental energy. All of this energy was indiscriminately absorbed into the dreamy glow of the crystal.

The Domingo Crystal was like a sponge for magic energy.

After a while, Link stopped the transfer of energy and the phenomenal dreamy glow of white light instantaneously disappeared. The Domingo Crystal was now enveloped by a slightly reddish hue.

Link then spent 320 Mana points to cast a Level-4 Flame Blast spell. The Domingo Crystal shone with a clear crimson glow after the transfer of energy this time. A message appeared in Link's field of vision.

Fire Domingo Crystal.

Capacity: 15% filled

To be only 15% filled after housing a Level-4 spell, it really does have a huge capacity. Link thought.

A Flame Blast spell should be enough to deal with Magician Bale, there was no need to over extend the capacity of the Domingo Crystal and waste any more Mana points. Furthermore, it was a good habit to always keep his Mana more than halfway filled for any emergencies. This was especially true for Link, who had many enemies.

Link then placed the Domingo Crystal back into the dimensional pendant. Two hours later, there was a knock on his door.

Link glanced at his watch and opened the door with the Magician's Hand spell. The door creaked open and a young Rylai sheepishly stood behind the door with a basic staff in her hands.

"Come in." Link waved his hand.

Rylai was extremely nervous and inched forward. Once she entered the room, Link closed the door behind her using the Magician's Hand. The sound caused by the closing door made her jump in fear, causing her to advance even slower.

Magic was mysterious and powerful. Rylai knew that Link had unimaginable power from the stories she had heard since she entered The Flamingo Band of Mercenaries two weeks ago.

She knew that Link consecutively defeated two groups of Syndicate bandits from the Dark Brotherhood. His magic was akin to a Sword of Judgement, feared and respected by all.

Though Link was only a few years older than her, Rylai felt unexplainable pressure just from standing in front of him. This was especially so now that they were alone in an enclosed space. She felt like she was facing a ferocious beast who was prepared to tear her into pieces the moment she let her guard down.

Link chuckled at Rylai's reaction. Whenever he displayed magic in front of a layman, he could always evoke this expression of fear and respect.

Link adjusted his seating position and lay casually in his chair. He then spoke in a comforting tone, "Do you know what is magic?"

"No...No..." Rylai could not complete her sentence, she was way too nervous.

"It can be said to be the brightest pearl bestowed by the Creator. It is the crystallization of wisdom and makes the impossible seem plausible. It is also the only avenue for a mortal to converse with the gods. Do you want to learn such an amazing skill?" Link smiled at Rylai.

"I...want to." Rylai was completely drawn in. She felt like Link was extending his hands to pull her out of the mire that was her fate. He was like a god delivering his grace to the mortal world.

In that instant, she forgot all her fears and pressure.

Even after she had great accomplishments in magic many years later, this scene would still be etched clearly in her mind. The lazy and young Magician, laying on his chair, opening her eyes to a whole new world.

"Sit down over here." Link knew that he had successfully relieved the tension.

Rylai carefully sat beside him. Between them was a table with three magic books and a magic scroll. Link waited for Rylai to recollect herself, before asking, "Can you read?"

Rylai nodded, "Yes, my father once taught me."

"Good." This was good news. Link would not have to spend time teaching Rylai how to read, which was a foundation for learning magic. He then pushed the magic scrolls towards Rylai.

"Have you used a magic scroll before?"

"No..." Rylai shook her head. On the other hand, her eyes were curiously eyeing the magic scroll on the table.

"Open it." Link chuckled.

Link knew that the first step to learning magic was usually the toughest. This was because behind the glory and mysterious facade of magic was a network of complex

theories and formations.

Many people with extraordinary magic potential gave up as they could not stand having to learn the mundane basic theories. Link was busy and would not have much time to tutor Rylai. Most of the time, she would have to learn magic by herself. Hence, Link would have to evoke her interest to facilitate her self-study.

Rylai placed the magic scroll on her lap and carefully opened it.

The spell enchanted onto the scroll was a Level-0 spell, Illumination. Link had made alterations to the scroll such that only people with magic potential would be able to activate the spell sealed within.

"Can you see the single glowing rune on the magic scroll?" Link asked.

"Yes." Rylai nodded. Her eyes shone as she held the magic scroll in her hand. She was extremely afraid to move in fear of damaging the scroll.

"Now, clear your mind of any thoughts and focus on this rune." Link was patiently guiding Rylai along.

After ten seconds, the rune glowed with a bright light which flowed to illuminate the rest of the writings on the magic scroll. A ball of light then slowly rose up from the scroll.

"You can control it, am I right?" Link softly asked.

"Yes." Rylai was intrigued. She felt that her spirit was connected tightly to this ball of light. If she willed it to go to the left, it would slowly float towards the left side. It was amazing.

She disregarded Link's gaze and was fully absorbed into the magic, willing it to go further and further away. When the ball of light reached a distance of 45 feet, the connection she had felt previously suddenly disappeared.

The ball of light quivered before disintegrating into the air.

This was not out of Rylai's expectations. However, she was still dumbfounded and trying to process what had just happened.

Link did not disrupt her thoughts and slowly waited till Rylai was done reminiscing about the wonders of magic. "That was the Illumination spell. It is your very first spell. Interesting isn't it?"

"Yes," Rylai cheerfully agreed. That was a mysterious experience.

"However, that spell was not cast by you, but by the assistance of the magic scroll. A real Magician can cast even more powerful spells without the help of any object."

Link then materialized a glass orb in his hand. When he snapped his fingers, the glass orb would disappear and become a gentle ball of light. After one second, the sphere of light would be transformed into a high-pitched Whistle, its sound reverberating through the room.

Rylai was completely awestruck by the seamless transition between the different spells.

"Teacher, what do I need to do?" Rylai spoke after a moment of silence.

"First, read these three books." Link pushed the three magic books on the table towards Rylai.

The books were, The Original Thoughts, Mana the Extension of the Mind, and The Theory of the Foundations of Magic. These three books were called the enlightenment books of magic, widely used to train the foundational skills of budding Magicians using a specific training regime.

"Follow whatever that is stated in the book. I will determine the results of your training the next time I return from the academy. If I am satisfied with your progress, I will teach you how to release your first spell," Link said.

"I understand," Rylai nodded. After Link's stunning display of magic, her fear had turned into curiosity and determination. She was certain that grasping this power would allow her to change her fate.

Link was satisfied when he saw the determination in Rylai's eyes.

He was certain that if Rylai continued to hold this passion for magic, she would become a well-known name amongst Magicians in ten years' time.

All he needed to do was guide her along the way and provide her with opportunities to practice magic.

He had not only accomplished all his duties in River Cove Town, but also managed to recruit a talented Magician. It was time for him to return to the academy.

After bidding his goodbyes, Link boarded the carriage bound for East Cove Higher Magic Academy. He was carrying a bag full of snacks prepared by Lucy for him to munch on along the way. Link kept the window open and whistled while admiring the beautiful scenery of the Girvent Forest. It had been an incredible break from his mundane life in the academy.

However, the good times did not last. Link felt a strong disturbance in the wind element on both sides of King's Lane. He was the target of a high-level spell!

Someone is trying to ambush me! This feeling... it is at least a Level-3 wind elemental spell! Link was shocked. He had to think of something fast.

Level-3 Defensive Magic, Edelweiss!

The moment his defensive spell took form, three wind blades at least six feet in length plowed through the forest in a neat formation, heading murderously towards the only carriage in sight. Link was in danger!

Chapter 100

The Cost of Underestimating the Opponent

Once he saw the wind daggers, Link immediately recognized it as one of the spells of the air element – Storm of Daggers.

Storm of Daggers

Level-3 Spell

Effects: Concentrated wind energy formed into three extremely sharp daggers. When the wind daggers hit their target, they will break up into countless small daggers, enveloping an area of about 30 feet wide.

(Note: Its nickname in battlefields is 'meat grinder'.)

To ordinary people, there was nowhere to hide from this lethal spell. Even if they managed to dodge the direct attacks of the three wind daggers, they would be faced with the deadly shards that formed after that. The only fate that awaited them was death.

To a Magician, though, as long as they could cast a defensive spell of the same level, the Storm of Daggers was even easier to block than any other spell of the same level.

The reason for that was simple – it was spread out into a big area. The strength of the Storm of Daggers was also too scattered, making it extremely easy to deflect.

With Edelweiss, Link had nothing to fear of the onslaught of the Storm of Daggers. He could even retaliate with his own attacks immediately, although there was a slight problem because the opponent was hiding among the trees. Link could only estimate his location by the trail of fluctuating Mana he left behind.

Right now, what he needed was a powerful spell that would work in a big area. As the thought occurred, Link stumbled on the perfect solution immediately. What would be a more suitable spell to use in this situation than Flame Blast?

Like the Storm of Daggers, Flame Blast's attack was spread out into a huge area, but it was also a level higher than the Storm of Daggers. Link used the Matchstick wand to cast this Flame Blast, so it was not as powerful as the one he unleashed in Gladstone, although it was still a force to be reckoned with.

Because Flame Blast was a Level-4 spell, its spellcasting time could be as long as 2 seconds, which was far too long to leave oneself vulnerable to the opponent's attacks. That's where the Domingo Crystal came in handy.

When Link was in River Cove Town, he imbued enough fire element into the Domingo crystal for one Flame Blast, and now was the perfect time to use it.

Mana surged wildly in Link's body then rushed into the wand before finally forming into the complex Flame Blast spell structure.

At the same time, under the great attraction of the spell structure of Flame Blast, the Domingo crystal began to glow. The fire elements stored in it came raging out, and there was a strong resonance, quickly forming a large fireball.

Link didn't stay in the carriage in the process. Before the Storm of Daggers hit the carriage, he opened the door and jumped out. He chose where he ran to carefully, which was in the space between the three wind daggers.

In doing so, he avoided the most powerful part of the Level-3 spell and had to only deal with the tiny blades afterwards.

Then he could hear a whistling sound. Two wind daggers grazed past the side of his body and a portion of the daggers scraped into the Edelweiss force field, rustling Link's black hair. When his feet touched the ground, the wind daggers hit the carriage behind him.

One of the daggers sliced through the carriage, splitting the entire carriage into two halves. Another dagger hit the horses and the two horses were cut into four chunks. The last one headed towards the coachman, and a second later the coachman was split in half from the waist.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The three wind daggers then exploded and broke up into small blades. The whistling wind suddenly picked up momentum and became violent. The air was now filled with swarms of tiny blades. The carriage, the dead horses and the coachman's corpse was turned quickly into a mass of minced flesh and crumbling

dust.

There were now countless microscopic wind daggers hitting Link's Edelweiss shield. The elements and the force field kept clashing with each other, each clash showing up as a spark on the outer layer of the Edelweiss shield.

Both were Level-3 spells, but while one was broken up and scattered, the other was intact and stable. The small blades had no chance of penetrating the shield; Link was safe without a scratch under the protection of his spell.

At the same moment Link's feet was firmly on the ground, he pointed the Matchstick wand towards the direction that the Storm of Daggers came from and immediately a blindingly bright sheet of light extended from the wand's tip.

It was Link's Flame Blast, unleashed at a breakneck speed. If slowed down, one would then see that the blinding light was made up of an incandescent fireball the size of a soccer ball surrounded by a visible heat wave about three feet thick around the fireball – a sign that showed just how blisteringly hot the fireball was.

Link had managed to cast Flame Blast in 1.1 seconds – an almost unimaginable speed!

About half a second later, the Flame Blast fireball burst into the forest and exploded.

Boom!

The explosion was ear-splittingly loud. It kept the ground rumbling for a few seconds and it created a powerful shock wave that was visible to the naked eye. It was strong enough to shake and quiver the trees in the forest. This then sent the birds in the trees flying frantically in droves, almost covering the sky in a dark mass.

In the midst of the thundering explosion, Link could make out a scream.

He knew instantly that his spell had hit the opponent and had even seriously hurt the opponent.

He'd cast a Level-4 spell in 1.1 seconds—it was so incredibly fast that he was sure that there was no chance for the opponent to hide or evade from the Flame Blast's assault. In fact, even Link wasn't sure if he could survive from such an attack himself because in the absence of preparation. Almost no Magician on the Firuman continent could build a Level-4 defensive spell within 1.1 seconds, unless he was equipped with a

powerful magic gear or a defensive Domingo Crystal.

The dense forest in front of him was blown into a mess of wood and leaves. In the center of the explosion, a tree was blown into oblivion and around it there was crater about a foot and a half wide. On the edge of the crater, the vegetation was on fire, making a crackling sound as they burned.

Link then walked up to the crater—he wanted to see who the attacker was with his own eyes. He was capable of casting a Level-3 spell, so Link knew at least that this was no ordinary rogue or bandit.

Link protected himself with the Edelweiss spell and gave himself a boost from the Cat's Agility spell.

Link slowly approached the crater, but he couldn't find a dead body. He searched all around, but the shrubs were all burning, so there was no way that anyone could be hiding behind them. Link continued to look around before he finally found a corpse under a tree...no, it wasn't a corpse, the man was still alive.

He was desperately leaning against the tree, and his clothes were burned to crisp, leaving only a few wisps of rags hanging on it. The exposed skin was burned and blackened too and his hands were tightly clutching a wand, but the wand was already shattered, only half of it remained.

He heard Link's movement, so he opened his eyes which were slightly shut before.

"How did you know Flame Blast? How did you cast it so quickly?" he deliriously asked in a hoarse voice.

Link couldn't be any older than 17, how was it possible that he could master a Level-4 spell? And how did he manage to cast it in such a frightening speed?

None of it made sense to Darris. He never thought that he would be defeated by attacks that he didn't even understand!

If it had been any other magician, a Flame Blast would require 3 seconds to cast. That would be more than enough time for Darris to counter the opponent's spell, or even kill them before the completion of the spellcasting. At the very least, he would've had the time to escape from the center of explosion and he would not have ended up as badly injured as he was now.

But everything happened too fast.

He had just unleashed the Storm of Daggers and didn't even have time to see the results of his attack before he was attacked by the Flame Blast. He initially thought that it was just a very big Level-3 Fireball. If he didn't cast a Level-2 Guarding Barrier on himself before he unleashed the Storm of Daggers, by now he would've been blown to pieces.

It was as if he'd been assuming that his opponent was a defenseless pig waiting to be slaughtered, only to find out that the pig was in fact a powerful dragon that could finish him off in one move!

Link's gaze, however, was fixed on the broken wand in his hand.

"Are you Darris?" he asked.

This greenish wand was made of a special wooden material and Link clearly recalled seeing Darris wielding it in Bale's Mage Tower, so he naturally recognized it at a glance.

Darris ignored the question, his blood-red eyes were staring fixedly at Link.

"You answer my questions first!" Darris then said.

Although it wasn't a direct answer, the response had nonetheless confirmed Link's suspicion. He'd also seen through Darris' plans by the actions he took.

"Since you've made a move against me, that means you must've found out about what I did in River Cove Town," said Link, "I'd only ever used Level-2 spells there, so you must've thought that I was a Level-2 Magician. You used the Level-3 spell Storm of Daggers to attack me and even ambushed me in the carriage – but I don't think you intended to kill me at all, you only meant to incapacitate me then squeeze out as much information from me as you could, especially about the identity of the person who sent me to investigate Bale in the first place. The fact that you didn't hesitate to kill the coachman showed that you were out for blood...You were going to get rid of me and those behind me once and for all, am I right?"

Darris stared at Link in horror as he spelled out his plans step by step, as if he could see through his soul and read his mind.

Link knew that the look on Darris' face proved that he was right. So he smiled and said,

"The only mistake you made was to underestimate my strength."

Then, Link lifted his wand and pointed it at Darris' forehead. His face was cold and emotionless when he said, "Darris, am I right in saying that your tutor is messing with black magic and that you are assisting him?"

"So what if that's true?" answered Darris, "Master Bale is only searching for a way to live forever, he never did any harm to anyone, so why should he be punished?"

Darris didn't want to die, but logic and experience told him that it was all over for him. Driven by fear, he began to scream hysterically.

"Are you sure what you're doing is truly harmless?" said Link, shaking his head. "Look at what you did! What did that coachman do to deserve that fate? When he was alive, he was a woman's husband, a child's father, a father's son, he might even be the sole pillar of support for his family, and yet you killed him without even batting an eye! Do you see how cold-blooded you've become?"

"He's just a peasant! So what if I killed a peasant?" Darris pressed on, though there was now much less conviction in his words.

"Oh, yes, you're right. He was indeed just a peasant. Need I remind you who else was just a peasant, Darris? Have you completely forgotten your roots now that you've learned to cast a few spells?" said Link, sneering.

Darris was speechless. Link's words had hit his soft spot.

"Just kill me, then," Darris finally said, "You're the winner, so you can say whatever you want!"

"Oh, you're wrong again, Darris, I'm not going to kill you!" said Link, shaking his head, "Your actions today are the iron-clad proof that Bale was involved in black magic. I will take you back to the academy!"

The moment Link finished his sentence, Darris finally lost all control and shouted in fear.

"No, please, I can't go back," he begged, "I can't betray my tutor! Please just kill me now!"

If he was brought back to the East Cove Magic Academy, he would then receive the punishments for disobeying the rules of the academy and his name would forever be condemned there. He would also be stripped of his magical powers and become an ordinary man who, because of the murder, would then be tried by the civil courts and his neck would eventually end up on a guillotine.

Then, his name would be disgraced for centuries after his own death, and to him, this fate was much worse than death itself!

As it happened, the Mana in his body started to boil up. He was attempting to use magic to commit suicide.

Link sneered at the sight, then kicked him in the neck, which knocked him out straight away.

"What a selfish and hypocritical scum. You can't betray your tutor? Ha! It's your own hide that you can't betray!"

As Link was kicking Darris, a notification popped up suddenly on the interface. It was announcing that the mission of investigating Bale was completed.

Investigation Mission Completed.

Player Rewarded with 25 Omni Points.

New Mission Activated: Expose.

Mission Details: Expose the Magician Bale's involvement with black magic without tarnishing the East Cove Magic Academy's good reputation.

Mission Rewards: 40 Omni Points.

This was another mission that Link was more than happy to accept.

Chapter 101

Tying Up the Loose Ends

Link received a new mission after defeating Darris. He originally intended to bring Darris straight back to the Easy Cove Higher Magic Academy. However, he decided against it after some thought.

The mission states that I am not allowed to ruin the name of the academy. It will be too impulsive if I bring Darris directly to the academy and accuse him in front of everyone, Link thought.

Darris definitely had to be brought back for investigation. However, he could not be openly accused. The implications of a Level-6 Magician and his chief disciple researching black magic together is way too devastating. While punishment had to be met, Principal Anthony definitely did not want word to get out and reflect negatively on the academy.

Anthony would prefer to quietly settle this issue with minimum damage to the academy's reputation.

Link could also be an impulsive teenager and openly condemn Bale and Darris for his own emotional catharsis. However, he would not only be criticized for his immaturity, but also not gain any tangible benefits.

It was no longer a problem regarding magic, but one of crisis management. If he could resolve this in a mature manner, he would be able to gain a lot of recognition.

After some thought, Link calmed himself down and first cast an Elemental Healing spell on Darris to keep him alive. Following which, he cast a Hypnosis spell on him to keep him sedated for the entire journey.

Link was not planning to leave any traces of their battle as well. After Darris was taken care of, he made sure the Girvent Forest was restored back to its original state.

First and foremost, the giant crater on the ground caused by the explosion had to be filled. It was obvious that the crater was caused by the release of a powerful spell, and

any occurrences of magic in the Girvent Forest would automatically be linked to the East Cove Higher Magic Academy. This could ignite dissent amongst the people or even fear of the academy.

Link quickly covered the crater using a Shapeshifting spell.

Secondly, Link had to destroy the evidence of splintered wood and metal bolts from the carriage destroyed by the wind blades. He opened another crater on the floor and buried all these materials before filling it up.

Link then built upon these foundations and erased nearly all the evidence of their battle. Apart from a few burned patches of grass, the forest looked as good as new.

Link made sure to keep his recovery work wholesome enough such that it would look natural to an ordinary human, but not flawless so that any Magician who passed by would still be able to tell what happened. This was to preserve enough evidence to prevent Darris from denying what happened when they reached the academy.

Link then checked Darris' condition. He seemed to be breathing normally and not in any danger.

"Alright, now we will return to the academy!" Link chuckled.

The carriage was ruined but he had magic on his side.

He had 90 Omni Points. After browsing through the spells he could learn, he spent 30 Omni Points to purchase a summoning spell, Wind Fenrir.

Wind Fenrir

Level-3 Summoning Spell

Mana Cost: 150 Mana Points.

Effect: Summons a wind elemental wolf to aid you in battle. Lasts one hour.

(Note: It is a strong battle companion, but can also be used as a mount when needed.)

Link's vision blurred slightly and after two seconds, he had got the spell in his arsenal.

The in-game spell learning system is really convenient! Link thought.

Since he had already recovered from his weakened state, he had 900 Mana Points, 150 Mana Points was nothing to him.

Link held out his staff and filled it with Mana. Immediately, the sounds of howling winds could be heard; the wind elementals concentrated in front of him and kicked up a storm of sand. By the time the roaring winds dissipated, a nine-foot-tall green Fenrir appeared. It looked extremely intimidating with lightning bolts and a piercing gust of wind surrounding its body.

"Good. Sit," Link commanded.

The wind Fenrir instantaneously obeyed. Link loaded Darris and himself on its back and hollered, "Advance!"

The wind Fenrir darted forward with an insane speed of 150 feet per second. There was also little to no turbulence nor uncomfortable strong winds. It was in essence, a comfortable and stable ride.

What a convenient spell.

River Cove Town and The East Cove Higher Magic Academy were only around six miles apart. With the wind Fenrir, they could probably cover the distance in 15 minutes. However, Darris actually woke up in this short amount of time.

He was after all a Level-4 Magician and had a stronger soul than an ordinary human. A Level-0 Hypnosis spell had little to no effect on him, only lasting for less than half an hour.

Darris realized that he was on the back of a giant wolf when he woke up. From his years of studying magic, he naturally recognized this as the Level-3 Wind Fenrir summoning spell. He then turned his head and saw Link.

Link still looked as young as ever, even slightly childish. The Mana that anyone could sense from his body was still low, merely at the level of an apprentice. The only difference was his eyes. They now shone with confidence and experience, vastly different from the humble and careful ones he was familiar with.

Link must have been using some form of magic equipment that concealed his Mana

presence, Darris thought.

A Level-4 Magician that was only 17 years old...Darris had always believed that he was a genius. Thinking back, what was he doing at the age of 17? Probably still racking his brains over the simplest magic books and feeling accomplished when he succeeded in writing a Level-0 magic scroll. It was a huge blow to his self-esteem.

"Who was the one who ordered you to investigate on my master?" Darris already gave up struggling.

He knew that he did not even have the chance to commit suicide. From the moment he woke up, Link's staff was placed strategically at the back of his head. A Hypnosis spell would easily knock him out again if he tried to escape.

He only wanted to know who was the mastermind.

Link laughed, "Don't ask me such pointless questions. You will naturally know when we reach the academy. I, on the other hand, am really curious. Judging from your character, you would not normally agree to help your master in his black magic research. What made you take that dangerous path?"

"I am simply grateful to my master..." Darris meekly spoke.

"Stop the nonsense!" Link interrupted, "Tell me the truth!"

Based on Link's observation, Darris valued his future over anything else. Research into black magic was punishable by death through burning of the body at the God of Light Temple. There was no way he could have risked his life simply because he was grateful.

Darris felt like he had met his mortal enemy. Not only was he defeated, his motives were also completely seen through.

After a moment of silence, Darris said, "In exchange, my master granted me access to Bryant's Scroll of Enlightenment."

Chapter 102

The Scroll of Enlightenment

The reputation of the Legendary Magician Bryant was well-known throughout the Firuman continent, and in the East Cove Magic Academy he was even revered as one of the gods. To think that this magic scroll was created by such an exalted figure and was even given such a name as the Scroll of Enlightenment – there was no doubt that this was an extraordinarily priceless treasure.

"Bryant's Scroll of Enlightenment?" Link was stunned. He recalled how there was something like this in the game, too, and in fact, Link had even owned such a thing himself.

There were six Scrolls of Enlightenment in total and each scroll was of Epic quality. Once a player obtained one of these scrolls, they would enjoy a permanent boost and enhancement in their attributes. And if the six scrolls were gathered together, a Legendary Scroll would then be created.

The Legendary scroll was called the Apocalypse Scroll and it could significantly enhance the players' various attributes, especially their Maximum Mana, which could be increased by 100% with the scroll's help. Ever since obtaining the Scroll of Enlightening, Link had never run out of Mana, even after fighting against Boss-level opponents.

Link never expected to find the scrolls here in the real Firuman continent. The revelation of their existence thrilled him to the core.

The scrolls were precious, not only because of their ability to promote the attributes of the owner, but the knowledge contained in the scroll alone was priceless in itself. If one was to study all six Scrolls of Enlightenment thoroughly, it would be the equivalent of inheriting most of Bryant's knowledge and wisdom.

Darris didn't know what was on Link's mind. He thought Link was silent because he anticipated more information from him, so he added, "Yes, my tutor owns a Scroll of Enlightenment. Though incomplete, it still contains amazing magic wisdom. I was able to become a Level-4 Magician at the age of 30, mostly thanks to the Scroll of

Enlightenment."

"Just one scroll? That's too bad. What would happen if there was a full set of six Scrolls of Enlightenment?" asked Link.

"The complete set of...six...How did you know there were six of them?!" Darris' eyes widened in shock, as if he had seen a ghost. The existence of the Scroll of Apocalypse was his tutor's greatest secret—the only people in the whole academy who knew of it were him and his tutor alone. How was it possible that Link would know there were six Scrolls of Enlightenment in total?

Darris' expression startled Link as well, though he quickly regained his composure. He'd forgotten the fact that the existence of Bryant's Scrolls of Enlightenment was supposed to be a secret here, but of course he wouldn't bother explaining himself to Darris.

"I know much more than you think I do. You should've gotten used to that by now," said Link.

Darris stared at Link searchingly, only to realize that Link was shrouded in a cloud of mystery. The more he tried to understand him, the less he did.

"Go on, don't stop talking!" Link urged.

Darris was silent for a while longer, forming sentences in his mind before he began again. "You're right that there are six Scrolls of Enlightenment. Legends have it that they contained the ultimate secret to Bryant's ascension to Legendary-level. But too much time had passed since then, and these scrolls were presumed to be lost. However, apart from myself, no one knows that my tutor possesses the scroll. I know the exact location of the reel. If you let me go, I'll tell you about it," said Darris.

Darris saw his chance, and he used the Scroll of Enlightenment as the bargaining chip in exchange for his freedom. To be perfectly honest, even Link was tempted by the deal. Still, after considering it for a moment, Link shook his head and refused.

"The scroll has been in Bale's hands for so many years, yet he is still no more than a Level-6 Magician. It seems that his Scroll isn't so impressive, after all. You might as well just give up, Darris."

"No, you don't understand," Darris added, "The six scrolls are connected, so as long as

you have one of them, you can search it for clues of the location of the other five. My tutor is only a Level-6 Magician because the Scroll of Enlightenment in his hands was the most basic one. The other five must contain the secret to ascension to the Legendary-level. Trust me, I'm not lying to you!"

As they got closer and closer to the East Cove Magic Academy, Darris' tone became more anxious and more urgent. He knew that the moment they reached the academy, he would be doomed.

After hearing what Darris had to say, Link laughed and glanced down at him and said, "Do you take me for a fool?" said Link.

"But...everything I said is true," stammered Darris, suddenly with a tinge of guilt in his voice.

"If you could really find the other five scrolls from one scroll, why didn't Bale find them himself after so many years?" asked Link.

"You don't understand," answered Darris hastily, "He knows where the other scrolls are, but he couldn't get to them – these scrolls were all in treacherous places, and he was already 60 years old when he received the scroll. He was just too old to do it!"

"I see..." said Link, "And he must've thought that it was too great an opportunity to pass up, so he turned to studying black magic in order to find ways to extend his life and then he would go find the other scrolls. My guess is that he's also promised you that if you helped him find them, he'd let you study the Enlightenment scrolls too, isn't that right?"

Darris was rendered speechless. The truth was almost exactly as Link had described it. As he came face-to-face with those dark eyes, all Darris felt was fear and dread. It was as if the eyes were able to pierce the soul.

Seeing Darris' reaction, a faint smile appeared on Link's face.

"You can stop talking nonsense now, I will never believe you and I don't need you to find the Scrolls of Enlightenment. I'll do it myself."

These scrolls may be very powerful, and perhaps they really could help people to ascend to the Legendary level, but so what? Link had the help of the gaming system, so he would never encounter an insuperable stumbling block where he couldn't

advance further. As long as he kept completing the missions he was assigned to, he would continue to earn more Omni Points that would help him get stronger. So, why would he do something so risky as releasing Darris?

Seeing Link's cold and indifferent attitude, the fear Darris' heart melted and turned into boiling hatred. The resentment of the words from his mouth constantly spray out. The contempt he held inside him then exploded into a flurry of bitter words.

"I curse you!" he started saying. "I curse you to a life of loneliness! I curse you to be betrayed by the people you trust the most! I curse yo—"

Snap! Without wasting his breath, Link struck Darris' neck and knocked him out.

Curse? That might work in scaring ordinary people. But to a Magician, curses were nothing more than the last innocuous barks of a dying dog.

Soon, the East Cove Magic Academy's front gates came into view. Link could make out from afar that the gatekeeper Vincent was basking in the sun in his garden.

Vincent had not noticed them yet.

To avoid causing a commotion, Link had long halted the Wolf Storm spell, then he used Magician's Hand to carry Darris into the gates of the East Cove Magic Academy.

When they entered the gates, Vincent finally noticed the blackened and burned body of Darris. He rose from his chair and rushed towards them.

"Link, who is this hapless man? What happened to him?" asked Vincent.

Link bowed respectfully at Vincent as he always did, then said, "When I found him, he told me he was Darris, the Magician Bale's chief disciple. But you can see how bad his condition is yourself, so I'm not sure if he really is who he claims to be. Mr. Vincent, what should I do?" Link thought it was wisest to only inform the highest officials in the East Cove Magic Academy of what Bale and Darris were up to. There was no need to spread the news to the others.

Vincent was stunned when he heard the name. Darris? Isn't he the young gifted Magician of the East Cove Magic Academy? But how did he get into such a ghastly state?

He was almost completely disfigured and unrecognizable, so it was not certain at all if this man truly was Darris. But if it really was him, then he must've been attacked by an unimaginably powerful Magician. But who in the Girvent Forest would have the audacity to attack a Magician from the East Cove Magic Academy? This turned out to be a grave situation after all.

Vincent thought that it was much too serious for him to handle, he must bring the matter up to the dean. "You wait for me here," he told Link. "I must report this to the dean!"

Although it was Link's intention to inform the dean of Bale's and Darris' involvement in black magic, still, he couldn't let Vincent go to the dean now. The dean had never met Link and he never suspected Bale. If it all came down to his words against Bale's, Link feared the dean would completely dismiss everything he said as nonsense. Furthermore, if they acted too hastily, the news might get leaked to Bale and he could easily escape before they got to him.

It was even possible that Vincent might think of doing Bale a favor and notify Bale of the situation first.

And that was just one of the possibilities of how things could go wrong. There were countless other ways where problems might arise.

But Link was prepared for all of it. He took a step forward, and held on to Vincent.

"Mr. Vincent, wait, I think it's better not to inform the dean yet. We shouldn't let anyone else know either, in case it was all a misunderstanding. This person might not really be Darris after all, and that could cause a huge problem."

Vincent realized he was acting too rashly. Link was right. When he considered it carefully, it was indeed unwise to go straight to the dean. He was the gatekeeper, if this turned out to be a mistake, it would cast him in a bad light—and he wouldn't want that!

He was satisfied with his current position as the gatekeeper, where the work was easy, and he got to put on airs too. He was planning to work in this position until the last day of his life, if possible. He wouldn't do anything that might put his position at a risk.

"What should we do, then?" asked Vincent.

"Isn't the Magician Moira the dean's favorite disciple? She's kind and gentle, so I think you'd better find her first. Even if this turned out to be a mistake, I'm sure she won't blame you. If it isn't a mistake, then she could promptly report the incident to the dean without delay, don't you agree?"

Vincent slapped his thigh immediately as he heard Link's explanation.

"You're right, I'll go find Moira now!" he said.

He hurried into the academy and went straight to Moira's Mage Tower.

Chapter 103

The Missing Magician Bale

Half an hour after Vincent entered the academy, a carriage emerged from within the academy. From the carriage, Link felt a familiar calming yet divine magic presence—it was Herrera!

Link heaved a sigh of relief.

The carriage stopped in front of Vincent's security wooden hut. Herrera opened the carriage's window and observed Link with her clear blue eyes. She was clearly surprised by what she saw.

Link had the feather of disguise to conceal his magic presence. In the eyes of others, he was no different from any other apprentice. However, Herrera was the one who had given him the feather and was thus not affected by its effect. She could tell from a glance the huge amount of magic power emanating from Link.

It was at least on par with a Level-4 Magician.

A power worthy of the title, the Chosen One, Herrera thought.

The moment Herrera alighted from the carriage, her attention was drawn to the heavily injured Darris who was laid casually on the ground. His whole body was charred and his features disfigured. Based on his appearance alone, no one would believe that this was once the promising and suave Magician Darris. Even Bale might not be able to recognize his chief disciple in this state.

However, Magicians had a different way to determine someone's identity. The most reliable way to check for a person's identity was through their magic presence.

Herrera cast an Aura of Detection spell on herself and confirmed that the charred piece of flesh in front of her was indeed Darris.

"It seems like he was hit by a Level-4 Flame Blast spell...Vincent, I need to talk to Link in private." Herrera looked sternly at Vincent.

"I will go boil some water back in my hut."

Vincent did not question her decision.

"Thank you very much," Herrera replied politely.

Only Herrera and Link were left.

Herrera first released a Soundproof Barrier spell to ensure their privacy before asking, "What exactly happened?"

Link narrated his encounters in the Girvent Forest, not missing out on any detail. He recounted the ambush, the battle, his conversation with Darris and finally his recovery work on the forest.

"I cannot prove what I just said as I do not have a memory crystal. However, you can always question Darris when he wakes up. The battle scene at the Girvent Forest is also a telling evidence. They can prove the accuracy of my account." Link said.

Herrera then waved her hands, "There is no need to, I believe you."

There was no reason for Link to lie. Furthermore, there was nothing illogical or suspicious about his account. The fact that Darris was so severely injured outside of the academy already proved the fact that something sinister was going on.

Darris was supposed to be in the academy at this hour. Leaving the academy without any valid reason was definitely something out of the ordinary, especially for a high-ranking Magician like Darris.

"You handled the situation well. It will be for the best if this issue is settled quietly. We cannot harm the reputation of the academy, much less create the dangerous impression that members of the academy are using magic without consideration of the implications. Now that we have concrete evidence, we will bring him to Principal Anthony directly," Herrera explained.

Magician Bale was a member of the six-person council of the academy. The only person of a higher status than Bale was Principal Anthony, making him the only person who had the authority to deal out any punishment to Bale. Furthermore, Magician Bale was also the strongest Magician in the council. In case of any emergencies, Anthony was probably the only person who could put a stop to his madness.

Link nodded and made use of The Magician's Hand to drag Darris up into Herrera's carriage. With a slight movement of his wand, Darris floated up in the air effortlessly.

Only at that moment did Herrera notice Link's new magic wand. While not aesthetically pleasing, she was surprised by what she saw.

"An Epic quality wand, did you make this yourself?" Herrera was shocked.

Based on her calculations, it had not been a month since Link started learning enchanting magic. It was nearly impossible that he could reach this standard in such a short period of time.

It was an insanely fast speed even for the Chosen One.

Link sat down in the carriage and passed his matchstick to Herrera, "Quite an ordinary wand. In fact, I am thinking of getting a new one soon."

He felt extremely accomplished when he first created the wand. However, after this period of training, he had once again deepened his understanding of magic. Looking at the matchstick now, he felt that it was too unrefined.

Herrera carefully inspected the wand and sighed, "I have nothing more to teach you in the area of enchanting magic. In fact, you have already surpassed me in some areas."

Time really did pass quickly. Just two months ago, Link was inquiring about the fundamentals of enchanting magic. Now, he had already become a mid-level Enchanter like her, and had even developed his own enchantment technique.

She returned the wand to Link and said, "There are indeed obvious flaws in this wand. The main reason for that is probably the quality of the material used. I'll tell you what, when this issue is settled, I will bring you down to my storage. If there are any materials that you'd like, I can sell them to you at half price."

"Is that so...but I might not be able to afford them even then." Link looked expectantly at Herrera.

"Getting them for free is out of the question. They are all my treasures."

Herrera shot a glance at Link, displaying her irritation at his attempt at taking advantage of her kindness.

Even though Herrera had not revealed her true self, she still looked extremely beautiful, even more so when she was being teased.

Link's heart raced and he immediately averted his gaze, "How about paying you in installments?"

"Sure," Herrera spoke, "But there will be interest."

"Have you ever considered being a merchant?" Link did not expect Herrera to be this calculative.

"A successful Magician is usually a shrewd merchant as well. How do you think we are funding our magic research?" Herrera winked.

"It seems like I need to devise my own plan," Link agreed. In fact, he had already made some plans in this aspect.

At that moment, they had arrived at Principal Anthony's Mage Tower.

"When you see my master, let me do the talking. Do not speak unless he tells you to. Understand?" Herrera spoke in a serious tone.

"I understand," Link said.

Link noticed that Herrera was slightly nervous. She took a deep breath before towing the injured Darris down the carriage. Link trailed behind dutifully.

Anthony's Mage Tower had a special name. It was widely known as The Heaven's Thorn as it was the tallest building in the academy. There were also three giant floating runic spheres surrounding the Mage Tower, each one a strong magic tool. When activated, they would form a strong Guarding Barrier around the Mage Tower.

Herrera stood at the entrance and lightly tapped the runes on the gate with her staff. When Herrera's staff came into contact with the respective runes, they would light up in a warm glow. After the third time, the magic gate disintegrated and the path was clear.

A middle-aged man stood behind the gate. Upon seeing Herrera, he smiled cheerfully, "Moir, what brings you here today?" Herrera then replied, "Matthew, I request an audience with Master."

Matthew shook his head, "That is unfortunate. The Principal is not in the academy today. He has departed for Hot Springs City to attend a meeting regarding the upcoming war. The kingdom seems to be choosing Magician candidates to aid them in their fight against the northern borders. He will be back by tonight."

Matthew's attention was then drawn to a disheveled Darris. Being a strong Magician, he could recognize him in a glance. "Is this Darris, what happened?"

This was something out of Herrera's expectation. Their time was tight as Bale might notice Darris' disappearance anytime.

Who knew what a Level-6 Magician was capable of when forced into a corner?

"What do we do now?" Herrera instinctively looked at her only comrade, Link.

This was also something out of Link's expectation. After thinking for a moment, he whispered, "Let's return to your Mage Tower and imprison Darris. After that, we will approach Bale directly."

His voice was extremely soft; Herrera was the only one who heard him.

There was no time to call for a meeting with the six-person council. Furthermore, it would take lots of evidence and investigation before the council would buy their side of the story. By then, Bale would have thought of an alternative.

As such, the best alternative now was to approach Bale directly and catch him off guard. If needed, they could aid each other in combat and secure a victory in a battle against Bale.

Matthew then shot a puzzling glance at Link, "This apprentice is ...?"

Herrera had no time to explain. She waved her wand and carried Darris into the carriage.

"Matthew, I have things I need to attend to. See you later."

"Wait...what exactly is happening?" Matthew was confounded.

But Herrera and Link had already left.

They hurried back to Herrera's Mage Tower and cast a Level-5 Restriction Barrier on Darris. After making sure that Darris was unable to escape, they then made a run for Bale's Mage Tower.

Herrera bolted through the front door and headed straight for Derek, "Where is Magician Bale?"

Derek was clearly shocked. He first bowed politely to Herrera before staring curiously at Link, "Master just left the Mage Tower. Link, did anything happen?"

Herrera was bewildered, "What? He left? Where did he go?"

"How would I know what master is up to?" Derek laid his hands out helplessly.

Herrera and Link had a common understanding and sighed. Bale had already noticed.

Although he had clearly aged and lost some focus, he was after all a Level-6 Magician with a keen instinct.

Since he knew that his secret was exposed, there was no reason for him to stay in the Mage Tower any longer, much less in the East Cove Higher Magic Academy. Naturally, he also would not inform anyone of his whereabouts.

Would he return? No one was sure. However, Link knew that if he was placed in Bale's shoes, he would run as far as he could and never return to the academy.

There would not be any immediate implications if a Level-6 Magician wandered out of the academy. However, a powerful dark Magician roaming the World of Firuman in the future was definitely something to worry about.

"We must find Bale!" Herrera was serious. She would not risk losing the life of innocents to black magic.

Chapter 104

Mist Basin

How would one smoke a Level-6 Magician out of hiding?

Herrera had been thinking about this for a few minutes and came up with no solution at all.

When a Level-6 Magician escaped and was bent on hiding his tracks, it was almost impossible to uncover his trails. Herrera was sure that there were no less than a handful of people in the whole world who would be able to do it.

Meanwhile, Link was also turning the problem over in his mind.

Ideas after ideas flickered on and off in his mind as he tried to work out the possible routes Bale could've taken in his escape.

Bale was an old man, so he could discard the idea of him sneaking out on his feet straight away. The only ways he could escape, was either by magic or by carriage.

Would the Level-6 Magician use magic to escape?

If he did, one possible method was through the academy's portal tower. But the cost of transporting through portal towers were sky-high, so unless there was a great emergency – as when the Dean used it to go to Springs City to meet with the army Magician for example – the portal would not be used at all. Even if Bale had access to the portal tower, it would've left a record of his usage and could even leave traces of where he'd been transported to. That could expose his whereabouts, which made it a bad choice to escape with.

Another important point was that Link suspected Bale was oblivious of the dean's absence from the academy.

The reason was very simple; the dean's actions must've been kept confidential. Even his favorite disciple Herrera was not informed of it, so why would the old and dodderly Bale be?

And that meant that Bale felt intimidated by the dean's power. He would never choose an escape route that would attract the president's attention. Just because Herrera couldn't detect any trace of Bale's magic, that didn't mean that the Dean who was a Level-7 Magician couldn't. That ruled out the possibility that Bale used magic to escape from the East Cove Magic Academy.

"Bale must now be in a carriage on the King's Lane, we must chase him," said Link.

For a moment, Herrera was stunned. Not because she was confused by Link's statement – she was smart enough to follow Link's reasoning – but his words just now had pointed out what should've been obvious to her. It was as if he had roused her from a stupor she was in as she was shaken from witnessing Bale's magic recently.

"Of course, I get it now," said Herrera, "Yes, let's go."

Time was of the essence, so they departed straight away without asking anyone else for help.

In fact, there was no need to get anyone's help as the two were powerful enough to go against Bale. When two Magicians teamed up against one in a battle, they would be at a huge advantage, especially with Link on their side. Although Link wasn't a high-level Magician yet, his spellcasting was still lightning fast and that came very much in handy when in battle against another Magician.

Speedy spellcasting was the most crucial skill in magic battles. It didn't matter how many powerful and impressive spells you knew, if the opponent could attack you with the speed of machine guns, you would lose anyway.

Link was confident that as long as they could catch up with Bale, they could easily defeat him!

Link and Herrera were now walking on the path that connected the Mage Towers of the academy. Because it was three o'clock in the afternoon, most Magicians and their apprentices were busy working in their respective towers, so there was basically no one on the path at all.

They were most likely going to engage in a battle once they've tracked Bale down, so Herrera realized that the cumbersome dress she was wearing was not fit for the task. She suddenly stopped in a remote corner and said, "Give me a minute."

Link was puzzled for a moment and didn't know what was going on.

Herrera didn't explain either, all she did was cast a Level-2 camouflage spell, Shadow Screen, and then a milky mist shrouded her and formed an opaque screen around the remote corner. Link was within the screen as well.

Then, the Magician's robe on Herrera's body came to life and slid right off of Herrera's bod. She was then naked, without a stitch of clothes on her body, right in front of Link, and she acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world!

Link stole a glance before he could stop himself and his heart was pounding hard in his chest as he saw the Herrera's ethereal body. Her fair and flawless skin seemed to glow from within and her figure was even more enticing than Lucy's – especially those long and slender legs. She was already 35 years old, but time had not left its mark on her. All in all, her body seemed to have struck the golden ratio.

"Whoa!" Link quickly averted his eyes and turned beet red, "Herrera, you should've warned me in advance!"

By now there was a dark blue soft material wounding around Herrera's body. It then quickly wrapped her body and eventually formed a battle attire, complete with armor.

The fabric glimmered in a light blue aura, and each metal plate of the armor was made of a much stronger metal than Mithril – Thorium. Moreover, magic runes covered the whole attire. One would see at a glance that it is an unusually powerful magic gear.

Herrera was at first somewhat confused by Link's remarks, but after a while there was a look of guilt on her face.

"My apologies," said Herrera, "In the Glorious Kingdom there is no gender distinction between the Angels of Light. I forgot how it was different with humans."

Link wanted to say he didn't mind it at all, but he realized that from now on Herrera was probably not going to make the same mistake of getting naked in front of Link again. He slightly regretted reminding her earlier.

After putting on the battle attire, Herrera quickly wrote a letter that briefly summarized the situation regarding Bale and then cast the spell Cheetah's Agility on Link and herself.

It was a Level-2 upgrade of the Level-1 spell Cat's Agility. In addition to greatly enhancing agility, the spell also provided an additional boost of strength, just like the beast it was named after.

After being cast with the spell, their speed suddenly shot up significantly and only three minutes later they were already out of the East Cove Magic Academy.

Once they were at the gates, Link rushed to the small cabin where Vincent was.

"Was there a carriage leaving the academy recently?" asked Link.

"There was one," answered Vincent, obviously confused by Link's urgent tone. He kept staring quizzically at both Herrera and Link.

"It was heading east."

"East?" Link was surprised. The east was where the capital city of the Norton kingdom was. But what was Bale thinking going to Springs City?

"Let's go," said Herrera, "We must catch up with him."

Link nodded, and pointed his wand to the ground, then under Vincent's stupefied gaze he whispered, "Wind Fenrir!"

In a blink of an eye, the Level-3 Wind Fenrir appeared at Vincent's door. The Level-2 Magician Vincent was so flabbergasted his eyeballs almost fell out of their sockets.

What's going on? Vincent couldn't help wondering. Isn't he just a Magician's Apprentice? Isn't he a talentless weakling with no future? How is it possible for him to cast a Level-3 spell?

Vincent had always been putting on airs around Link, but this time, his was so impressed with him his jaw almost hit the ground.

Link ignored the gatekeeper's searching gaze and ordered the Wind Fenrir to crouch down. He then turned to Herrera and said, "Ladies first."

Herrera was extraordinary nimble because of Cheetah's Agility. With swift movements, she handed her letter to Vincent.

"Remember, hand this letter to the dean!" said Herrera.

The letter was just a precaution in case they failed to track down Bale or if something unexpected happened to them. The academy would then have some clues on how to find them.

"Ah, yes, yes...I will." Herrera's orders finally roused Vincent back from his daze.

Herrera then jumped onto the Wind Fenrir and Link followed her, sitting behind Herrera. Link telepathically controlled the magical beast. In a swift movement, the Wind Fenrir got up and rushed out at a terrifying speed.

Whooosh!

Link and Herrera had to hold on to each other tightly to stay on the beast. It would've seemed like an intimate position in normal circumstances, but Link of course had no indecent thoughts in his head, as it was filled with thoughts about Bale instead.

Bale must know that there are so many powerful people in Springs City who could easily hunt him down – even the dean is there. Bale might as well just surrender himself if he was to flee there. If I was him, would I choose to hide in Springs City? Link contemplated.

And the answer was absolutely not. If Link was on the run, he would head to the Free Trade Confederation in the South instead, for there were many countries there and each country had their own laws that could not interfere with each other. Although the countries of the confederation were independent, they could also be chaotic – and that made the place ideal as a hideout. Bale would not have any problem taking cover there.

Still, they couldn't rely on Vincent's statement alone to determine Bale's whereabouts.

"Magic Trails!" Herrera cast a powerful tracking spell.

Magic Trails

Level-4 Spell

Effects: Detects traces of magic in the environment. It is capable of discerning even the most minuscule remnant of magic.

After the spell was cast, the road ahead of them lit up, and the band of light appeared along the King's Lane, stretching all the way into the distance.

Herrera was overjoyed to see the band of light.

"Great, so Bale didn't use concealing spells to hide his own magic trace!"

This trail was, after all, the Mana that his body emitted.

Link controlled the Wind Fenrir to follow the light trail all the way, and after about 20 minutes, the road forked into two. There were signs on each of the forked paths – the one on the right read Springs City, and the one on the left read Mist Basin.

Curiously enough, the magic trail wasn't heading towards Springs City, but went straight to the North towards Mist Basin instead.

Link wasn't surprised. This made complete sense based on the information they had so far. What he didn't expect was how surprised Herrera was.

"What's going on?" she remarked, "Is Bale connected to the Dark Trails in Girvent Forest?"

Herrera had been investigating the dark trails in the Girvent Forest for some time now. She even asked for Link's help more than half a month ago. Her inspection had yielded results recently. She had found that the Dark Trails were most concentrated in the north of the forest – where the Mist Basin was.

Soon after Herrera finished her sentence, a notification popped up.

Bale had fled the academy.

Completed mission: Expose.

Player rewarded with 40 Omni Points.

New Mission Activated: The Mysterious Mist Basin.

Mission Details: Investigate the Dark Trails in the basin and search for the missing Bale.

Mission Rewards: 60 Omni Points.

Good grief, it was obvious just by reading the notification how perilous this mission would be. The biggest threat lay in the environment of the basin itself.

Link had great confidence in himself if he was to face an opponent head-on. But the basin was dense with vegetation and the thick white fog would greatly reduce his vision – this created the ideal condition for an ambush. Bale would most probably not confront them directly. What's more, it's possible that he had accomplices hiding with him there. To fight against a Level-6 Master Magician in this condition, when everything was working Bale's favor was truly a deadly mission.

If they rushed into it without any plans, there's a good chance that they would be charging head on to their certain deaths.

Even though Link now had 100 Omni Points and even had the Domingo crystal with him, he was still hesitant in accepting this mission. At least not for now, when he had no support except Herrera.

But then, something unexpected happened.

"Let's pursue him! I can sense that something big is lurking under the surface here. We must not let Bale escape!" said Herrera, with no hesitation at all.

"Wait, shouldn't we go back and get more people to help us?" said Link, so surprised that the Wind Fenrir came to a standstill.

"No, we're running out of time. This is the only chance we have to seize Bale. We must at least go there and scan the place and gauge the situation. The moment we sense anything disconcerting, we'll retreat immediately."

Herrera was well aware of the danger, and she made her decision having taken it into account.

Link considered it for a while, and finally nodded.

Chapter 105

Two Puny Opponents

Due to its low geographical position and the lush overgrowth, the Mist Basin was covered permanently in a cloud of white fog. Despite the fog being completely harmless, it greatly affected visibility in the area, making the Mist Basin a perfect hiding spot.

The hunters in the Girvent Forest never once went into the Mist Basin. If an enemy were to enter the area, any form of pursuit would be halted.

It was an extremely dangerous and mysterious place.

A carriage slowly prodded along the winding and narrow path, braving the uneven ground and thick overgrowth. As the carriage traveled further into the forest, the path became even narrower.

When the carriage was crossing a crater, an axle loosened which resulted in a detached wheel. With an imbalanced support, the carriage stopped in its tracks.

"My lord, we are unable to proceed any further."

The coachman stared at the cascading fog in front with apprehension. There was no way he could tell if there was a slope or a pothole in front as the visibility was way too low. The fact that only a wheel was detached on this entire journey was already a blessing.

However, the coachman had no idea that he was about to meet his end.

A dark green beam of light flashed right through the carriage, ignoring any form of physical segmentation. Under the effect of the sinister light, the area within a radius of 15 feet around the carriage became absolutely clear of fog.

The next moment, the coachman, the carriage and the horses froze in time, before disintegrating into fine white particles.

The only living being left on that winding, misty, forest trail was an old Magician clad in a dark green robe with a white crystal silver staff in his hand.

Magician Bale looked painfully at the pile of white sand and whispered, "I am truly sorry, my friend."

After which, a thick white miasma formed at the tip of the white crystal. Bale pointed his staff forward as the mist slowly began to take form, eventually taking the shape of a white face.

"Bring me to your master!" Bale's voice was weak. He was getting old and could feel the shadows of death creeping closer every single day. He was forced to extend his lifespan with black magic.

His knowledge of black magic was fundamental at best. However, through the course of his research, he found a kindred soul.

To be exact, Bale was approached by this individual. Compared to Bale, this person was a lot more knowledgeable in black magic, especially undead magic. He was hence like a mentor to Bale and as a Magician with a flair for magic, Bale's proficiency in black magic improved by leaps and bounds under his guidance.

The bolt of green light previously was a forbidden magic termed Shattering spell. It was only a Level-3 spell but had way more offensive power than ordinary elemental magic due to the use of dark energy.

The white-faced individual led the way while Bale trailed closely behind. He was traveling at a really fast pace, so much so that Bale had to cast a Levitation spell to keep up.

After traveling for around 19 miles, the thick forest slowly opened up into a huge open space. There was a small lake filled with eerily black water, looking very much like the proverbial gate to hell. On its side was a giant rock more than 90 feet in width and length. A black Mage Tower was strategically built on top of this rock, towering above the entire forest.

The architecture of this Mage Tower was vastly different from those in the East Cove Higher Magic Academy. It was heavily decorated with statues of ferocious and sinister beasts such as howling wolves, scorpions and venomous snakes. There were at least six of these statues on every level.

Magician Bale shuddered at the sight of this Mage Tower. Despite him having a strong soul of a Level-6 Magician, he could only be considered a beginner when it came to black magic.

The white-faced individual continued guiding Bale along a narrow footpath until they reached the entrance of the Mage Tower. The gate of the tower sprung open at their arrival, revealing a hooded black robed Magician surrounded by two dancing green flames standing behind it. He seemed to be expecting them.

"Bale, you seem to have arrived earlier than I thought." The person spoke in a raspy low voice, just like a broken bellow.

Bale was trying to catch his breath. He was indeed losing grasp of his vitality. Despite the use of magic, the long journey had taken a toll on his body.

"Shade, I have been exposed. My time is almost up as well. Please take me into the realm of eternal life," Bale spoke, gasping for air.

"Exposed? You mean you are currently on the run? Are you sure you have no pursuers?" Shade was clearly displeased. After all, he was still within the Land of Light and could easily be exposed to danger.

Bale then spoke slowly, "I purposely lured two of them here. One of them is a Level-5 Magician, and the other, probably a Level-4 Magician. They are the only ones who know about us. It should be easy for you to defeat them using the Mage Tower. Kill them and our secret will be safe."

Bale had been vigilant. From the moment Darris left the academy on his own accord, he had been monitoring the people entering and leaving the academy. Hence, when Link brought back an injured Darris and left for Anthony's Mage Tower with Herrera, he knew it was time for him to leave.

He also knew that Anthony had left for Hot Springs City. However, there were still many strong Level-6 Magicians in the academy. The only thing he could do was to go on the run.

He originally intended to escape to the South, but changed his mind after realizing that he only had two pursuers. "Probably Level-4? You have to tell me the exact strength of my opponent?" Shade hated to deal with uncertainty.

"He managed to cast a Flame Blast spell despite being only 17 years old. I highly suspect that he used a magic scroll to aid him in that battle. That means he might be even weaker than a Level-4 Magician. In any case, you have no reason to be afraid of a 17-year-old Magician, am I right?" Bale had never thought of Link as a problem.

Bale had dabbled in magic for the past 50 years and had many Supreme Magic Skills in his arsenal. Furthermore, he had battle experience that only came with age. It would be strange if he was afraid of someone who was young enough to be his grandson.

Shade heaved a sigh of relief.

Age was often an indicator of a Magician's battle prowess. Even if a Magician were to reach a high level at a young age, he would not receive as much respect.

An older Magician would definitely have more spells and Supreme Magic Skills in his arsenal. If the two Magicians do engage in a battle, the older Magician would usually win by a landslide.

"Since that is the case, please enter. I have already prepared the ingredients. You can achieve immortality immediately," Shade invited Bale into his Mage Tower.

Bale bade a silent goodbye to his human self before stepping into the sinister Mage Tower.

The hall was barely furnished. The only captivating thing was the pond at the center of the hall filled with a bubbling green liquid. As the bubbles burst, a dark green miasma was released into the air.

"This is the pool of immortality. You will be able to gain eternal life from absorbing the essence in this pool. In this time, you will descend into a deep slumber and become defenseless. There is no cause for worry, I will fend off the pursuers for you," Shade explained the workings of the pool clearly to Bale.

Bale started doubting his choice. The pool was definitely enchanted with some sort of cursed magic. Did he really wish to abandon all that he worked for in the past 50 years?

However, he once again felt the energy drained from his body. This had happened a lot more frequently in the past few weeks. His life was like a flickering flame that could be extinguished any moment.

"I have no choice. Oh God of Light, please forgive my sins." The moment Bale laid down into the pool of green liquid, the bubbling ceased.

The pool of liquid was exceptionally still. Shade stood guard beside the pool, also completely motionless, even the two green flames that danced around him disappeared.

As time slowly passed, the pool began to bubble yet again, this time even more furiously than before. There were also peculiar movements in the surroundings of the Mage Tower.

All of a sudden, Shade's eyes shone with a green glow and the two dancing green flames bolted out of his iris.

"This is the scent of the living! These two puny little things! Don't think that you can leave as easily as you have arrived."

With the help of his Mage Tower, Shade could extend his spellcasting range to a maximum of 6000 feet. The area within 300 feet radius of his Mage Tower was even termed as his absolute territory.

If anyone was foolish enough to cross that boundary, he would show them the true meaning of despair!

Chapter 106

The Absolute Territory of the Necromancer (1)

At Mist Basin.

...

After brushing a bunch of branches aside, Link saw a black Mage Tower by the lake.

The Mage Tower of the Undead! That was the first thought that popped up in his mind.

Dark colors, strange stone carvings, black magic aura fluctuations – the features of the Mage Tower pointed to the identity of its owner.

The Necromancers – because they manipulated dead bodies and exploited souls, they were forsaken by the gods of the Light Pantheon.

If a Necromancer was originally born in the Realm of Light, once he devoted himself to the Dark Side and black magic, his soul would forever be forbidden to enter the Glorious Kingdom where the gods of the Light Pantheon resided.

A Necromancer's soul would wander forever in limbo and his life would continue indefinitely in this state. This was their state of immortality.

Herrera then walked towards Link and saw the black Mage Tower through the gaps of leaves. Judging from her reactions, it was clearly the first time she'd ever seen such a building.

"How could such an evil thing be so near to Springs City?!" she exclaimed.

If it had been in the Black Forest in the North, it wouldn't have been surprising at all, but this is right in the heart of the Realm of Light!

"Bale should be hiding in that Mage Tower," Link whispered, "And apart from him, there should be another black magician in there as well. Since he has his own Mage Tower, I'm sure he'll be at least as powerful as you and me. And if there's a

Necromancer in there who has probably lived for hundreds of years or more, then I'm afraid even our joint efforts won't be enough to defeat him, let alone defeat Bale too."

When a Magician's Apprentice mastered a Level-1 spell, they would then become a Level-1 Magician. Another Magician who has mastered 10 Level-1 spells would also be a Level-1 Magician. Although they both would technically be on the same level, the latter could easily defeat the former.

Necromancers could virtually live forever, so it wouldn't be surprising to find a Necromancer who was hundreds of years old. Time was on their side and the spells that they could master in that time would make Herrera and Link seem like rookies in comparison.

Link would really like to keep his Omni Points, but at the same time he knew that the current situation was dire. He must make the right choices now or lose his life.

This was the real world; there would be no chance to replay a battle if he lost his life here.

"But if we let him escape this time, we'd probably never find him again," muttered Herrera, hiding behind the bushes, "What if we head to Springs City now and find the dean? If we inform him what we found here, I'm sure he and the Court Magicians would come and help us."

Anthony was a Level-7 Magician and the royal family would generally only appoint high-level Magicians as Court Magicians. If Link and Herrera could get their help, it would greatly increase their chances of winning.

"Good idea," Link nodded, "We must hurry, let's go now."

So they turned around and retreated. The area was dense with vegetation but they decided not to use any magic spells to avoid attracting any attention from the Mage Tower. This made their movements considerably slow.

They had only been walking for about five or six minutes – no further than 150 feet – when something peculiar happened.

"Something's not right. Don't you notice how the white mist is getting thicker?" Herrera said.

The visibility range by that time was no further than 10 feet. In fact, Link found that he couldn't even clearly see Herrera's face anymore.

Herrera was a Level-5 Magician and an Angel of Light to boot—her sensitivity to black magic was much superior to Link. Right now, she could palpably feel black energy permeating through the air.

The trace of black magic that she felt was minute, like a drop of ink dripped into a glass of water, yet she felt it all the same.

"The opponent is stronger than I thought," said Herrera, "I'm afraid he's spotted us." Herrera had a Mage Tower of her own, so she knew how powerful a Mage Tower could be. But she didn't expect the opponent to be so perceptive that they would be spotted from more than 200 yards away.

She stopped walking as she was speaking and decided it was pointless to keep on hiding traces of her magic. The Mana in her body burst out, then she started to glow in a white light. The light spread out and as it touched Link's body, he seemed to be lit up as well and was then shrouded in a layer of white light.

Link recognized this spell at once.

Holy light

Level-4 Halo Spell

Mana Consumption: 280 points.

Casting Time: Instant

Effects: The spellcaster acts as the center from which light energy spreads. Any creature of the Realm of Light within the vicinity of the spellcaster receives a protection that will block out 90% of the power from same level magic attacks and a 100% increase in wound recovery rate. Any creature of the Dark Side in the vicinity will experience a 50% reduction in their energy level and an 80% decrease in their wound recovery rate.

(Note: This is a spell that only Angels of Light can cast – no mere mortals can master it!)

This was a very powerful halo spell and the effects of the spell were greatly increased the more creatures of the Realm of Light were within its area. When used on a troop of soldiers, they would then become an invincible holy army.

After casting the spell, Herrera quickly said, "They've started to make a move against us, we must move faster."

Link nodded. He then promptly summoned the Wind Fenrir, which was then shrouded in a white light as it came under the effects of the Holy Light as well.

"Get on," said Link.

Herrera leaped onto the back of the Wind Fenrir, then Link followed behind her. The Wind Fenrir howled, then charged forward through the dense forest, leaving behind the Undead Mage Tower in high speed.

It had been more than 4 hours after Link's battle with Darris, and his high Mana restoration rate had come into effect, so Link's Mana was now about 970 points – enough to cast three Flame Blast. He did so as soon as he was on the back of the Fenrir, though not as an attack, but only to charge the Domingo crystal.

Because the situation was critical, Link didn't bother to conceal the Domingo crystal from Herrera. She was stunned when she saw the crystal – she recognized what it was and how precious it was at the first glance.

Five seconds later, the Domingo crystal was fully charged. In it was stored the fire elements for one Flame Blast, so whenever he needed to, he could now unleash a deadly spell in 1.1 seconds!

It didn't come without a cost, though. The power and speed of Flame Blast would be lethal indeed, but it would also consume twice as much Mana – once for charging the crystal and once for casting it.

So now Link was left with 650 points of Mana. He took out a low-level Mana potion to replenish himself. The potion could only increase 100 points of Mana, but it was the only potion he had on hand, so it was better than nothing.

"Stop, drink this instead!" said Herrera. She handed him a bottle of potion.

Link looked at the potion in her hand. It was stored in a bottle made of Mithril and the

potion inside was a pure liquid a deep dark blue in color. He knew from a glance that it was a high-quality potion.

After looking at it for a second, a notification about it popped up.

Mid-level Mana Potion

Quality: Timeless

Effects: Provide 500 Mana Points.

(Note: The potion is slightly toxic, so it should only be taken once in two days. People with ordinary skill level are forbidden from drinking it, as it may create a violent Mana fluctuation and sudden death!)

What an incredible potion, thought Link. He took the bottle then bit off the cork and swallowed the potion in one gulp. It tasted a little strange – bitter and astringent, and cold in the stomach. Seconds later, the cool sensation rose up from his stomach, and spread to his limbs and throughout his body.

Then Link found that his Mana was almost completely restored, reaching up to 1150 points now. Apart from that, he still had 100 Omni Points on hand.

With full Mana, a charged Domingo crystal, and high Omni Points, Link now felt slightly calmer.

The Wind Fenrir continued to dart across the horizon for nearly half a mile, but strangely the mist in the forest did not clear up at all. Instead, it had grown thicker and almost turned into a solid white wall.

When the Wind Fenrir ran past a place that Link felt was familiar, he shouted a command to the beast, "Stop!"

The Wind Fenrir screeched to a halt.

"What's the matter?" asked the startled Herrera.

"Look," said Link, pointing to the side, where through the thick white mist, there was a glimpse of the lake and they could even hear the soft lapping of its waves.

In other words, the Wind Fenrir had been sprinting for a while now, yet it hadn't been taking Herrera and Link any further from the black Mage Tower but was only circling around the lake beside it.

"The fog blocks the visibility and creates the illusion of us moving in a straight line, but in fact we've been running in a circle all along!" whispered Link.

Herrera understood it now. This was just a normal illusion spell, once discovered, it was very easy to crack.

"Lamp of Truth!" Herrera raised her crystal wand and the amber crystal tip lit up and emitted a beam of laser-like light.

Lamp of Truth

Level-2 spell

Mana Consumption: 25 points.

Effects: Creates a beam of highly penetrative light that will always be straight unless the space around it is distorted.

The beam of light had enough energy that it easily penetrated the thick mist and showed a long, distorted light path in front of them.

The light of Lamp of Truth always showed the true straight line and it was only distorted now because of an illusion created by the opponent. It was actually almost impossible to bend and distort such a huge area of space. The fact that the opponent was capable of such a feat was a testament to his formidable strength. He could probably kill Link and Herrera with a flick of his finger.

"Follow the light," said Herrera, keeping her wand lifted.

Link nodded. He then controlled the Wind Fenrir to follow along the distorted path. It felt as if they were moving in a winding path, but in fact it was the actual straight line.

But they only managed to move for another 100 yards before another oddity occurred!

Suddenly a shadow scuttled out from the grove in front of them. The shadowy figure was unusually tall, at least 13 feet tall, but because the mist was obscuring the view,

they couldn't make out its exact features. One thing was clear, though—the figure moved very quickly. In a few moments, it was already next to the Wind Fenrir. The shadow slapped the beast with its bare hand and the slap hit right on the Wind Fenrir's head.

Even the massive body of the Level-3 magical beast was not able to withstand the attack. Its head was blown to pieces, and soon after its body began to collapse.

Fortunately, Herrera and Link were boosted by Cheetah's Agility, so they jumped down from the back of the Wind Fenrir just in time. And as soon as they reached the ground, they both shouted simultaneously.

"The undead!"

Link had noticed it because he smelled something rancid, while Herrera could sense the energy of black magic.

Chapter 107

The Absolute Territory of the Necromancer (2)

In actuality, their battle against the Necromancer began the moment they saw the Mage Tower. Herrera lived up to her name as Anthony's prized disciple. Although she was only one level higher than Link, her battle experience from nearly 20 years of magic research was not something Link could hope to match up to at this point. This was clear from the way Herrera fought.

The thick white mist was making it difficult to determine the exact location of their enemies. While Link was blindly casting his spells, Herrera decided to cast a Level-2 True Sight spell to dispel the mist. What Link had often thought of as superfluous spells were actually useful in certain situations and the ability to maximize their potential was something he still had to learn.

Bryant once said, "There are no useless spells, only useless Magicians." Link could not agree more.

It was neither an intense battle nor one filled with fancy spells. The only challenging part of the battle was the white mist which clouded their sense of direction. However, this could be potentially lethal from another perspective.

If Herrera and Link were ordinary humans with no magic powers, they would be completely helpless in this situation. This would hold true even if they had insanely strong Battle Auras. Hence, even if the kingdom had sent an entire army in an attempt to corner the Necromancer, the likelihood that they would even come close to his Mage Tower was close to zero. And that was the power of knowledge and experience.

Battles between Magicians were often a battle of both might and wit, as well as accurate predictions of the opponent's mentality. That was exactly what this battle was!

The appearance of undead Warriors meant that the Necromancer was finally showing his true colors. This undead soldier was a 15 feet tall giant with a thick exterior and insane strength. Despite being restricted by the holy aura, it still destroyed the Wind Fenrir in one hit. Following which, he charged straight at Link, swinging the wooden

club it held fiercely at Link.

Link instinctively wanted to dodge the attack, but stopped himself from doing so. One should never follow his human instincts in a fight, especially if the opponent is a Magician. Instincts were far too predictable, and following them would often lead you straight into the opponent's trap.

That was also the reason why some ordinary humans were defeated by Magicians despite being extremely skilled Warriors or Sharpshooters with quick reflexes. They depended mostly on their instincts and brute force in a battle, causing them to fall easily into a Magician's calculations.

The area behind Link was covered in a thick white mist. Link was almost sure that there were other undead Warriors waiting in ambush. If he were to follow his instincts and dodge the attack, he would be dead. However, he also had to fend off the incoming attack.

Link swiftly dodged sideways to extend the time taken for the incoming attack to hit him. At the same time, he raised his matchstick wand and cast a Level-3 Edelweiss spell on Herrera!

Edelweiss was a Level-3 spell and had decent magical and physical defensive power. Although Link was currently in danger of suffering a lethal blow, he was less concerned with the dangers that were currently visible to him. This was because he could already accurately predict when the attack would hit him.

On the other hand, while Herrera looked safe at the moment, would his opponent really ignore a Level-5 Magician and go after the Level-4 one? This was impossible!

Link predicted that his opponent had already planned an ambush on Herrera while she was focused on dealing with the undead giant. He was merely waiting for the right time to strike and deliver a lethal blow.

Link might just be overthinking, however, he would take no chances. His decisions at that moment truly revealed his potential and flair as a Magician.

Seeing that the Edelweiss spell was cast on her, Herrera was clearly surprised and shot Link a puzzling glance. The moment their eyes met, a mutual understanding was reached.

Herrera did not have Link's exceptional ability to make instantaneous and accurate predictions in battle, but she chose to put her complete faith in him.

She then concentrated fully on casting her spell. She raised her crystal staff and pointed it at the undead giant, "Shining Net of Blades!"

As an Angel of Light, Herrera naturally had a gift for using light elemental magic. This was the gift that her race was bestowed with.

Shining Net of Blades

Level-4 spell

Mana Cost: 330 points.

Casting Time: 3 seconds.

Effect: Accumulates the power of light elementals to create a net of extremely high temperature able to cut through most objects.

(Note: If the user is an Angel of Light, spellcasting time is reduced by 50%)

That meant Herrera could cast a Level-4 spell in 1.3 seconds. What a convenient gift.

A net shining in white light could be seen advancing towards the undead giant. It was extremely huge, leaving the undead no room for escape. When the net came in contact with its body, it cut through the flesh without any form of resistance, swiftly dismembering it.

A foul odor was released into the air. Without the sustenance of magic, the flesh began to rot almost immediately. It was such a toxic compound to the point that it was corroding the ground beneath, making sizzling sounds and causing more white mist to appear.

At that moment, the predicted attack on Herrera happened. It was slightly later than what Link expected. This should have been due to Herrera's exceptionally fast spellcasting speed. Judging from the normal time needed to cast a Level-4 spell, the time of the ambush was in fact timed perfectly.

This undead was extremely frail and small compared to the giant. It was no more than

four feet eight in height and held two daggers in his hands. Its speed, on the other hand, was extremely fast, and got within attacking proximity to Herrera in the blink of an eye.

It was an undead Assassin.

The only thing Herrera could do was to run forward. Under the effect of the Cheetah's Agility spell, she was traveling at an extremely fast speed and managed to put some distance between the attacker and herself.

However, she was still slower than her opponent. The Assassin thrust the dagger fiercely forward, hitting the Edelweiss barrier. The impact of the attack on the magic force field created ripples in the air.

The Edelweiss barrier greatly reduced the attacking speed of the Assassin, but was nonetheless, not enough to completely stop the attack. If nothing was done, Herrera would suffer a stab through the heart in the next second. But she was not alone. Link, who was saved from the giant's attack, could now focus completely on saving Herrera.

Whistle of Death!

A sharp whistling sound pierced through the atmosphere. Link made use of the fire elemental energy stored within the Domingo Crystal to fire a Whistle spell every 0.15 seconds. He fired three consecutive attacks in less than half a second time.

The first attack hit the undead Assassin on the right shoulder.

Link chose his attacking spots very wisely. He did not opt for the frailer but thinner arms, which would have a high chance of missing, especially if his opponent was travelling at a fast speed. The shoulder joint was the fulcrum which would have to be activated to exert force. Hence, not only would it have the same intended effect, it was also a much larger target.

Boom! The whistle penetrated into the undead and ripped off its right arm with a fierce explosion.

In order for the Assassin to move at such a fast speed, its defense was heavily compromised. Without its right arm, the undead lost its power and was easily rebounded by the Edelweiss force field. Herrera was safe!

The second whistle penetrated into the center of its chest, the explosion propelling it in the opposite direction.

The third whistle, on the other hand, flew into the thick cloud of mist beside Link and revealed another incoming undead Assassin. Its speed was comparable to the one that ambushed Herrera.

If Link had chosen to dodge the undead giant attack by retreating backwards, he would have been done in. The Necromancer probably did not expect Link to dodge sideways instead, explaining the delayed deployment of this third undead Warrior.

The third whistle was also something that the Necromancer did not expect. Despite attempts at dodging the attack, the Assassin's right arm was still hit and ripped off by the explosion.

The Assassin continued to advance towards Link, despite the loss of an arm. This affected its balance and greatly reducing its speed. This gave Herrera and Link a lot more time to react.

Link fired two more Whistles. One flew towards the undead Assassin that attacked Herrera, this time destroying it for good.

The other flew towards the Assassin heading towards him, hoping to once again reduce its speed. However, the Assassin was prepared this time. It successfully dodged the attack and headed straight for Link. Herrera immediately hollered, "Heat Ray!"

This was an extremely powerful single target Level-3 spell. A white streak of light flashed across the horizon, penetrating through the undead Assassin's brain.

All undead had a soul flame located in their brains which kept them alive. The intense heat from Herrera's spell instantaneously destroyed the magic structure of the flame and rendered it into a pile of rotten flesh.

The battle was finally over.

This was the high-level battling style between official Magicians. It involved intricate calculations, physical strength and spellcasting techniques. Any mistakes or carelessness would inevitably result in death.

This was on a completely different level than battles between low-level Magicians.

Herrera was still gasping for breath when she took a glance at Link. She was amazed at his battle capabilities; her eyes shone with a gleam of respect.

No wonder he is the Chosen One. To be able to unbind oneself from the deathly chains of the enemy so efficiently—it truly is a wonder to behold, Herrera thought.

Shade was also taken aback, "This young man is something...Alright, I will challenge the extent of your power!"

It was not an easy feat escaping from the combined assault of his undead trio. However, he had thousands of undead Warriors at his command; he would slowly wither them out.

Chapter 108

The Absolute Territory of the Necromancer (3)

At Mist Basin.

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After the death of three of the undead, Link and Herrera heard a great deal of noise coming from the forest and they noticed a large number of things approaching them. At the same time, the aura of black magic got more and more intense around them.

What made it that much more shocking was the fact that there was also a sound of wings flapping in the air, which meant that they wouldn't be able to escape by flying either.

There was no doubt that they were witnessing the undead army of the Necromancer!

"The opponent is hell-bent on keeping us here," said Herrera with a deep frown on her face, "Escaping this place is probably next to impossible now."

"The only way we could escape is to kill the Necromancer!" said Link.

Link had seen through the magic being used here now. The black magic he'd seen was very similar to the summoning spells he'd learned in the textbooks. The Necromancer's battle strategy so far hadn't been particularly unique either. The only way to get through all of this was to attack their leader head-on.

"But he's in the Mage Tower," said Herrera in an anguished voice. "And every time we try to approach it, we're hit by an endless barrage of black magic attacks!"

The sound of the undead army's footsteps got nearer and louder. Judging by the sound, there must be more than a thousand of them and they were approaching them from all directions – no doubt about it, they were now surrounded.

There was no feasible way for a Magician to attack or defeat another Magician in a Mage Tower. There are Elemental Pools in the Mage Tower, not to mention a large

number of magic seals which stored an unimaginable power of magic. Meanwhile, the Mage Tower itself was also resistant to magic attacks. Overall, Link and Herrera's combined powers were not nearly enough to bring it down.

To put it in Earth's terms, Link and Herrera were like empty handed soldiers, while their opponent was hiding in an armed tank. How was it possible for them to defeat the opponent? It was good enough for them to be able to escape.

But the situation that Link and Herrera were facing was much worse than that. Not only was the opponent inside a tank, he was also commanding an army that was inexhaustible in number. Link and Herrera had no way of defeating them all and they were prevented from fleeing. If they went on this way for any longer, they would certainly die off depleted Mana.

After a quick discussion, the two found that they were now in a truly desperate position.

"What should we do?" asked Herrera.

She was already at a loss of what step to take next. She had been continuously casting spells just now, and had depleted 20% of her Mana so far, yet all they've done was kill only three of the undead – and they were now confronted with a thousand more! Even if each of the undead was an easy target to kill, their numbers meant that they could use up their Mana to eliminate all of them. And a Magician with no Mana was nothing more than a sheep waiting to be slaughtered.

"We push through as hard as we can and head to the Mage Tower!" said Link, already charging forward. Herrera gritted her teeth and caught her breath, then followed Link.

While running, she reluctantly said, "The Necromancer should at least be a Level-5 Magician, it's impossible for us to break into his Mage Tower."

"It is possible," said Link, "I know a powerful spell, an extremely powerful spell. As long as we can get close to the tower, we'll have a chance of breaking into it!"

He still had one last trick up his sleeve after all – the 100 Omni Points.

At this point, the Mana in his body was almost full, so even though the opponent was hiding behind the walls of a Mage Tower, Link was confident that he could force himself in with a Level-8 spell, if only he could get closer to it.

This way, he could topple the opponent's tank with his own anti-tank missile!

Still, Herrera stared at Link in incredulity, doubtful of his claim of this extremely powerful spell.

"It's a divine revelation!" said Link, to convince Herrera.

As an Angel of Light, she had to concede once Link invoked the power of the gods. And so she finally went along with Link's plan.

They were now equipped with Cheetah's Agility, Herrera's Holy Light, as well as the Edelweiss shield. This time, even if the undead ambushed them under the cover of the thick white mist, they were still able to easily handle it.

The good news was that they were close to the lake, in fact they were almost on its shores. After charging forward for a few steps, Link leaped into the lake. As soon as his skin hit the water a cold shiver ran down his spine. He could feel that the lake water contained concentrated amounts of black magic elements. The lake water was so old that if it wasn't for the protection of the Edelweiss shield and Herrera's Holy Light, Link would've frozen to death right then and there.

Herrera followed him into the lake. They had no other place to run to since the land was teeming with the undead. Although they weren't afraid of them, they still couldn't afford to waste their limited Mana on these ghoulish puppets.

The undead were naturally unafraid of the water as well. When they saw Link and Herrera jumping into the lake, each of them followed suit. One by one they made a splash as they entered the water like dumplings dropped into the pot of soup.

But their speed in the water was far removed from their speed on land. In fact, it turned out that none of them could swim, so they sunk like bricks straight into the depths of the lake. Some of them still attempted to chase Link and Herrera as they reached the lakebed, but then their movements were too sluggish to pose any threats there.

"Levitation!"

Herrera cast a spell before she jumped over the lake, which allowed her to hover about three feet over the surface of the lake without a drop of water on her body. She then cast the spell on Link as well and he slowly floated up from the surface of the water.

"...Why didn't you cast this spell earlier?" asked Link with a muddled expression. He was slightly annoyed that she didn't cast the spell before he got himself as wet as a drowned rat.

Herrera couldn't help but smile at Link's look of distress look and she even calmed down a little.

"My bad," she said, holding in laughter, "But you were already in the water before I knew it!" She then pointed the wand in her hand at Link and cast a simple spell to dry him off.

Link couldn't argue with that, so he glided towards the Mage Tower with Herrera close behind.

Even though the thick white mist still obscured their vision, they didn't have to worry about getting lost because the Mana fluctuations around the Mage Tower were so strong that both of them knew where to head without looking.

They estimated that they should be slightly less than a mile away from the dark tower.

After gliding over the lake surface for close to a hundred feet, they realized that the mist on the surface of the lake became denser and denser. By now the visibility range was no more than a few feet, any further than that and it felt as if they were heading into a solid white wall.

To avoid getting lost, Herrera and Link had to move very closely together. In fact, their shoulders were almost touching as they glided towards the ominous Mage Tower.

By now, they both had no idea what to expect or what kind of danger they would face—nor did they know what kind of fate was waiting for them in the Mage Tower.

Meanwhile, in the Mage Tower, the Necromancer Shade was looking at the magic mirror which was showing him what Link and Herrera were up to.

"Did they jump into the lake?" said Shade, laughing, "They can't be rushing to their deaths fast enough!"

Shade had centuries of practice in defending the Mage Tower. In all these years, he had fought in countless battles, and he'd killed innumerable Magicians of the Realm of Light who had attempted to defeat him. How foolish of these Magicians to think that

he would leave the lake undefended!

Indeed, he had already prepared the final scenes for these two characters on the lake!

"Arise, Inosa!"

Shade was standing in the Mage Tower controlling the magic seals. He then pointed the wand in his hand towards the floor, and Mana shot towards one of the seals, making it glow instantaneously. Then, the aura it emitted started to spin, at first slowly but it gradually got faster and faster. About three seconds later, a stream of magic runes about eight inches thick shot out of the magic seal and headed towards the refracting crystal on the dome at the top of the tower.

As it hit the crystal, the stream of magic runes was reflected and it headed into the depths of the dark and murky lake.

Over the surface of the lake, Link and Herrera noticed the sudden flash of light, and at the same time they could distinctly feel the violent Mana fluctuations coming from Shade. Seconds later, they could feel the water under their feet began to stir. At first, there were ripples across the lake surface, then the ripples became waves and then the waves grew more vicious and more tumultuous.

The raging waves made noises so loud it was almost deafening.

Herrera was stunned by the changes in the lake and Link was alarmed himself. When he got here in the game in his previous life, Mist Basin was already occupied by the Dark Elves, so he didn't encounter the undead army or the Necromancer then.

But he did have a clear memory of the monster that rose from the depths of this lake.

He'd assumed, at that time, that the monster from the murky depths of the lake had always belonged to the Dark Elves instead of the Necromancer and was moved here later by the elves. That was why he'd chosen to jump into the lake. He'd realized too late that the monster had always been here, even before the Dark Elves' army arrived.

This was indeed an unexpected and most inconvenient turn of events.

Link clearly remembered that this behemoth of the depths was named Inosa. It was an Epic-level Boss. The word large couldn't begin to describe it. It was at least a hundred feet tall, and its appearance was similar to the eight-headed dragon of

Japanese folklore or the Lernean Hydra of Greek mythology.

This particular monster was a six-headed Hydra. Each head possessed a different magic power, and each was capable of unleashing one powerful Level-5 spell.

The lake water suddenly churned more violently, until finally, there was a loud booming noise. Out from the surface of the water, about a hundred yards away from Link and Herrera, the colossal beast emerged.

The momentum created by the monster's emergence from the depths of the lake was so powerful that even the dense mist on the surface of the lake was scattered and cleared out. Link and Herrera were then able to clearly see the monster.

Link had been prepared for this, so he was not much disturbed by the monster's appearance, though he was slightly surprised by how much more vicious the monster looked compared to the one he saw in the game. It was Herrera's first time seeing it though.

"But this is the six-headed Hydra, the hell dweller!" she exclaimed in a shaken voice after quietly examining the monster for a while. "How did it get here?"

Link realized that this Hydra was of the dragon variant. It's no wonder that it was an Epic-level Boss in the game.

"Do you have a way to deal with it?" Link asked Herrera.

This behemoth was more than a hundred feet tall, plus it was one of the more ferocious types of Hydra. Link figured his Flame Blasts could do no more harm to the monster than a few scratches, let alone defeat it. It would have to be up to Herrera now.

If even Herrera had no way of fighting this behemoth, then he would immediately give up the intention of defeating the Necromancer and spend the Omni Points he had to gain all the force necessary to escape.

He had initially chosen to fight to the end because he believed there was a chance for him to succeed. But as things stood now, Link was smart enough to know that fighting would mean certain death!

Herrera stared fixedly at Inosa. The monster made no move to attack, it was only malevolently baring its teeth in the distance. After scrutinizing it for three full seconds,

she finally made her decision.

"It isn't a pure-blood Hydra," said Herrera, "And it isn't that powerful either. I know a spell that could kill it, but it requires a long spellcasting time."

"How much time do you need?" asked Link, no longer hesitating between fighting or fleeing.

"One minute! It's a Level-6 spell that I've just mastered," answered Herrera.

"One minute it is then!" answered Link, "Go ahead! I'll buy you some time!"

Link was not the kind of person to go down without fighting back. They had been pounded with wave after wave of attacks from the Necromancer, so it was their turn to give him a taste of their power!

Chapter 109

A Grand Display of Magic Fireworks

Herrera knew that the Level-6 spell she just mastered was their only hope.

However, this spell was extremely powerful and she was still not used to casting it. She would have to divert all her attention onto the spell in order for it to be successful, leaving her vulnerable to any attacks. The slightest distraction could result in her death from the rebound of her mana and in the worst case scenario, killing Link in the process.

Herrera was fully prepared to give up her life in this battle, as the investigation into Bale's dark magic research was her choice. However, she would not allow Link to be in any danger—he was the Chosen One!

Herrera sighed and looked at Link apologetically, "I am too impatient. Link, I am so sorry to have dragged you into this."

Link stared at the stirring Inosa 300 feet away and urged, "Don't think too much about it. Let's begin preparing the spell."

It was not a time to attribute responsibilities. If they did not take care of the opponent right in front of them, they would be dead before they could determine who was at fault.

"Alright," Herrera nodded.

Since Herrera had to fully focus on casting the Level-6 spell, she would not be able to maintain her Levitation spell and Holy Aura spell. Herrera pointed her staff at the lake and whispered, "Freezing!"

Freezing

Level-3 spell

Effect: Concentrates a large number of water elementals and lowers their temperature

down to a freezing state.

A beam of white light pierced the lake and started freezing its surface at a speed visible to the naked eye. Before long, a circular platform more than 60 feet in diameter and 15 feet in thickness was floating on the liquid surface.

Although the platform was bobbing up and down on the water surface, it was very stable and had no chance of overturning.

Herrera then canceled her Levitation spell and landed gently onto the ice platform. She then began to use Shapeshifting magic to create a depression in the platform before sitting in it.

This was to ensure her stability so that she would not be distracted from the movement of the platform.

"I am ready."

Herrera forcefully inserted the crystal wand into the ice, transferring large amounts of Mana into the staff. A pristine white glow emerged at the tip of the crystal staff before enveloping her entire body, forming a dome of light. White flares emanated out of the light dome, illuminating the ice platform.

This was a phenomenon caused by accumulating an insane amount of light elementals.

A powerful magic disturbance could be felt in the atmosphere. A destructive magic was about to make an appearance.

It was still a light element spell, The Edge of Zenith!

Edge of Zenith

Level-6 Light Elemental Spell

Mana Cost: 680 points.

Effect: Gathers the power of light elementals to create a giant blade of light to deal apocalyptic damage on dark magic creatures.

(Note: This spell is for Angels of Light only. It is near impossible for any other race to master this spell.)

The mutated Hydra Inosa immediately sensed the incoming threat. Its six heads roared simultaneously, creating violent waves that crashed in many different directions. One could see air ripples being formed simply from the force of its roar.

Following which, the Hydra advanced towards Herrera. It was extremely fast despite its humongous size, causing tremors in the surrounding areas.

The undead Warriors under the lake seemed to be affected by this war cry as well, moving towards Link and Herrera at a much faster pace.

The movements of these undead were supported with a soul flame controlled by the Necromancer, Shade. Even then, they still retained some of their human instincts.

Some undead regained their muscle memories and started swimming towards Herrera. As time passed, more and more undead floated up to the surface.

Link could clearly perceive the dark aura emanating from the undead. They were as conspicuous as a candle flame in the dark.

Link had to use his magic to stall the undead for a minute.

In the Mage Tower, Shade sneered at the confrontation between Inosa and Link. While Inosa was merely a Level-4 beast, it was considered to be a unique breed.

Not only did it possess an unusually tough exterior, it could also release six Level-4 spells at once, one from each of its heads. Fighting against Inosa would be akin to fighting six Level-4 Magicians at once. Even with Shade's Level-5 strength, he had to spend a lot of effort before he could capture it.

He could not even guarantee his success if he had to do it again.

"My pet will definitely give you an unforgettable time."

Shade stared at his magic mirror with glee. He could already foresee Link struggling to deal with Inosa's violent attacks, and eventually meet his end with despair.

Inosa swiftly reached within a 240 feet radius of Herrera. This was the maximum

distance of a Flame Blast spell, and also coincidentally, the range of Inosa's magic attacks.

The six heads began their assault simultaneously, a different colored glow emerging in every one of their jaws. Based on the magic disturbance of these attacks, they were all Level-4 spells!

A huge black ice spear, a dark green corrosive ball, black burning fireballs—all of them were extremely lethal offensive magic.

This meant that if Link did not have the means to deal with six Level-4 spells at once, he would definitely be done in.

Link trusted his predictions and fired the preemptive strike. His Flame Blast spell had just taken form the moment Inosa stepped into its firing range. An incandescent fireball struck across the horizon and crashed into the body that connected the six heads of Inosa. This was the area where his spells would be the most effective in restricting Inosa's movements.

Inosa quickly reacted to Link's attack. It fired an attack similar to a thick black phlegm onto the fireball.

Link immediately changed the trajectory of his attack to evade his opponent's interception. However, the black phlegm similarly changed its course of action and stood stubbornly in the way of the explosive fireball. This meant that this spell was also controlled by Inosa's consciousness.

But Link had something else up his sleeve!

He fired a Whistle spell with his bare hands which penetrated into the thick black phlegm before it made contact with his Flame Blast spell.

Boom! The whistle exploded within the thick phlegm. As it was cast with his bare hands, it did not possess even half of its original power. However, the explosion was sufficient to destroy the magic formation of the black phlegm.

Inosa's attack disintegrated into the air, turning into countless black water droplets.

Using low-level spells to break the magic formation of high-level spells was a necessary skill that every Magician should possess.

Inosa was enraged and charged at Link with all the other five heads.

In the face of such an overwhelming attack, a normal Magician would be petrified and overwhelmed.

However, Link was a Magician that had countless battle experiences. He had fought enemies ten times more powerful and fended off magic attacks that were ten times more concentrated. He knew exactly how to deal with such predicaments.

This was nothing compared to what he had been through.

"Whistle! Glass Orb! Whistle!" He continued to cast low-level spells with his left hand, while controlling the Flame Blast spell using the staff in his right hand.

For spells that were more structurally stable such as the black ice spear, Link destroyed them with more offensive spells like the whistle. As for spells that were more loosely constructed like the black fireball, Link exploded them with his glass orbs. He took less than 0.5 seconds to fire all five low-level spells.

Even the fastest spell, the black ice spear only managed to reach a distance of 150 feet in this time before being intercepted by the whistle spell.

The magic structure of the whistle had an advantage in this match up. It had a metallic exterior and was extremely durable. Furthermore, it was also sharp and rotated at a high speed, boosting its penetrating power. These advantages allowed the whistle to penetrate into the ice spear before exploding.

The ice spear was then blasted into smithereens at a distance, the only thing that managed to hit Link being the shattered black ice fragments.

Link achieved the same results with the other four spells.

Boom! The sounds of exploding magic reverberated through the atmosphere, much like a splendid display of fireworks.

Link stood steadily on the ice platform, his expression as calm as still water and his tiny frail body seemingly immovable.

Shade frowned tightly in his Mage Tower. This did not turn out the way he expected it to be.

"Dividing his attention between multiple targets coupled with fast spellcasting speed and accuracy. How did he do it?" Shade felt threatened by Link's battle skills.

The next moment, Link's Flame Blast spell was about to hit its target!

Chapter 110

The Hydra, the Undead, and the Magic Spells

Over the surface of the black lake, the incandescent Flame Blast fireball shot through the air in a long arc. It went past the black water droplets that formed after the Black Phlegm collapsed and the Firework released by the Hydra and hit right at the Hydra's body.

Boom!

It was another earth-shattering explosion. Regardless of its power, Flame Blast was one of the loudest spells among all the elemental spells.

The incandescent flame wreaked havoc to the part of Hydra's body where its six heads were connected. The explosion lasted for five seconds before it completely disappeared.

Under the explosive impact of Flame Blast, the Hydra's six heads looked confounded. The half-formed spells that they were about to unleash in their mouths were disrupted and then collapsed. Its colossal body also lost its balance for a while, and that caused it to wobble about for a few seconds before it could stabilize itself again.

Still, the power of Flame Blast was insufficient to cause much damage to the Hydra. When the explosion died down, all that was left was some shallow scorched marks on the Hydra's skin, which recovered quickly. Then the Hydra shook its six heads and let out a thundering roar and was ready to move forward again.

In the end, one Flame Blast attack could only slow down the Hydra for five short seconds.

Link was mentally prepared for this outcome. In fact, the moment he unleashed the first Flame Blast he already had the second one in the works. They've worked so hard to finally gain the upper hand, so Link would never give the Hydra the opportunity to retaliate!

When the Hydra's body had just returned to balance and was about to move forward

and attack Link with another bout of spells, the second Flame Blast shot out from the tip of Link's wand. The spell was heading towards the same spot.

Link's timing was precise and the second attack hit the Hydra right at the second before it regained its footing. The Hydra couldn't block the attack at all, which was why this time there was no need to worry about its counterattack.

Boom!

Once again, another Flame Blast hit the Hydra's body at exactly the same position as before. Right after the explosion, Link went straight back to casting another one.

The third Flame Blast fireball quickly followed the previous one. Under Link's precise control, the second Flame Blast had moved slightly slower, while the third one moved much faster. This meant that the third attack hit the Hydra only about half a second after the second one.

The result was that the third Flame Blast burst into a blistering flame right when the explosion of the previous one was at its peak.

Ka-boom!

An earth-shattering boom resounded across the horizon as the two Flame Blast fireballs lined up almost perfectly to double their tempestuous power.

Wahhh!!

Finally, Link managed to make the Hydra howl in pain!

It was truly injured now and the wound wasn't shallow either. Its gigantic body began to flail and the Hydra started to seem wary of the small opponent in front of it. It then began to step backwards instinctively.

Splish, splash, splish, splash. The monster created huge waves with each of its footsteps.

Aren't you starting to get scared now, little guy? Link sneered silently, though he slightly regretted not being able to cast ten Flame Blast fireballs in a row – that would've been adequate to finish this monster off. Still, he had to preserve his Mana, so he had to be satisfied with the little progress he'd made.

After unleashing three Flame Blast fireballs in a row, Link had used up a good chunk of his Mana. He was down to 360 points now, which was only enough for one more Flame Blast. But using all of it up with one spell would just be too risky.

With his eyes fixed on the retreating Hydra, Link focused on a gaping wound on the huge scorched mark near its heads where thick black blood was gushing out. One of its head was almost detached from its neck, and the head was hanging limply from the joint. The eyes on it were still open, but it was basically next to useless.

The Hydra's will to live was ridiculously strong, though. While it was retreating, Link could discern how the gash was already starting to close in and heal. At this rate it would recover and attack them again soon.

Link's Mana was too low now to cast another Flame Blast to create another gaping wound on the Hydra's body, but he had enough Mana still to keep that wound open!

He still had Whistle after all!

Whistle was a spell of his that only consumed 3.5 points of Mana and its specialty was superior penetrative power. Its impressive effective range was at more than 300 feet.

Right now, the Hydra was about 290 feet away from Link, which was beyond the reach of Flame Blast. But it was also too far for the monster's spell to reach Link.

This meant that the ball was now in Link's court.

Link was now standing on the ice sheet. Although the monster was retreating from them, it was still within 300 feet from him, which meant that it was still within Whistle's range.

Ever since casting the last Flame Blast, Link's wand hadn't stopped glowing even for a second. It flashed every 0.2 seconds and one by one the metal spikes shot out from it and whistled through the air, aiming straight for the gaping wound on the Hydra's body.

The Hydra's skin was originally very thick and sturdy. Attacks from Link's Whistle could do nothing more than just tickle it. But now that the triple Flame Blasts had managed to puncture its skin and created an open gash, Link could aggravate its pain and suffering by attacking the wound with his Whistles – it would be just like rubbing salt on its wound!

Roar!!

With each attack, the Hydra's roar sounded more like a wail. It began to retreat, increasing in speed until at last it reached beyond Whistle's attacking range. That meant that Link was even further out of the monster's range of attack as well.

All the Hydra did now was stare at Link from afar and roar, perhaps out of anger, or perhaps even out of fear. Its multiple heads kept spewing out the different magic spell attacks at Link's direction – although to no avail. Each attack was unleashed at a high frequency, yet they had no effect on Link at all because they couldn't reach him.

And as soon as the monster advanced a little further forward, Link would immediately unleash the Whistle to attack its wound, aggravating its pain, which would then cause the Hydra to step back again.

When placed side by side for comparison, one was a young man who was less than six feet tall, while the other was a terrifying monster standing at a height of almost a hundred feet. One was a Magician who only had enough Mana to cast four Flame Blast fireballs, while the other had an inexhaustible energy to endlessly spit out powerful Level-4 spells. No matter how one looked at it, the disparity between these two sides seemed to be in the order of magnitudes.

Yet, strangely enough, they had now reached a virtual stalemate. There now seemed to be an invisible wall in front of the Hydra which stopped it from advancing further towards Link. And so each second passed by, and Link had now succeeded in delaying 40 seconds.

But the Hydra was not the sole threat that Herrera was facing. Just as Link managed to fend off the Hydra, the undead army then appeared.

These ghouls couldn't break through the thick sheet of ice, so they climbed up from the edge, and then mindlessly and fearlessly rushed toward the center of where Herrera was.

They all completely ignored Link and went straight for Herrera.

With the threat from the Hydra temporarily eliminated, Link retreated to Herrera's side, and his wand began to light up in a higher frequency now. He gave up on using Whistle because it worked on single targets, required longer spellcasting time and consumed too much Mana. It would be too wasteful to use Whistle attacks on low-

level opponents like the undead army.

Neither did he use the Level-2 spell Blizzard. The spell was highly effective in blocking the advance of normal opponents, but the undead knew no fear, so even if they were covered completely with ice shards, it would still have no effect on them and they would still be running and charging as if nothing happened.

Link's ultimate choice was the Level-0 spell Glass Orb.

Each Glass Orb consumed only 0.9 Mana points and they each contained the explosive power equivalent to a small grenade – overall, the Glass Orb spell was the best weapon to kill the undead!

Under Link's intense focus, he needed only 0.05 seconds to cast each Glass Orb, which would then accurately hit the skull of the undead. The undead was controlled and manipulated through the Flame of the Soul inside its skull, therefore as long as their skulls were blown up, they would either be dead or incapacitated.

There almost seemed to be an endless number of the undead. A steady stream kept climbing up the ice sheet. Fortunately, Link's spellcasting was faster. At a glance, a countless number of blue light orbs seemed to appear simultaneously, and each would hit a different target and then explode on impact.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound of the orbs exploding in close succession was similar to the sound of machine guns.

After each of the undead was shot, its head would be blown into pieces, and the Flame of the Soul in its brain would either be extinguished or at least damaged enough to incapacitate it.

When seen from above, each of the undead was like black dots that kept climbing up the ice sheet, then they were immediately knocked down by the light blue orb. Corpses began to pile up on the ice sheet. On the whole, the pile of corpses was gradually approaching Herrera, albeit very slowly.

Link fought with all the might he had left in him, maintaining high spellcasting speed and high accuracy in each shot.

As the seconds ticked by, the throbbing pain in his head became more and more unbearable. Beads of sweat constantly formed on his forehead, then it streamed down his face and flowed into his eyes, blurring his vision.

He knew that he wouldn't last much longer now, but he must hold out for as long as possible, otherwise it would be the end for both him and Herrera.

Time seemed to have come to a standstill, and each second felt like a year to Link. In the last five seconds, the undead army had reached less than 13 feet away from them. The stench of death and decay filled Link's nostrils, and he could see their rotting flesh and their dead eyes in gruesome detail.

Suddenly, one of Link's Glass Orbs missed its target. It should've hit the skull, but it hit the undead in its neck instead.

The explosion caused its head to be half disconnected from its shoulder. The wound would've been grave enough to kill a living person instantly, but on the undead, it seemed to make no difference at all. It stormed ahead as if nothing had happened, while half of its head was hanging off its shoulders!

Chapter 111

The State of Gibraltar

Link was shocked to see an undead breaking past his offensive barrage of spells. A ripple of doubt appeared on his usually calm demeanor. Spellcasting required a lot of concentration. Constructing the complex magic formation, converging elemental energy and locking down a target were steps that had to be executed to perfection.

Link was already at his limit by firing a Glass Orb spell every 0.5 seconds. To be able to fire his attacks in an orderly manner under such circumstances was extremely difficult and unthinkable even to most Magicians. Staying calm was key to achieving success in such situations. If Link was unable to maintain his inner peace, it would reflect immediately on his magic, messing up the tempo of his assault.

Link's Glass Orbs seemed to be firing in a random pattern only because of its fast speed. In actual fact, Link was firing them in a clockwise manner, constantly bombarding the undead and preventing them from crossing the boundary which ensured his safety. However, in the most recent assault, an undead managed to slip through the cracks. If Link were to remedy his mistake, the tempo of his assault would slowly begin to disintegrate.

As a result, more and more mistakes would appear and eventually result in a complete collapse of his spellcasting system. Link might even be lethally damaged by the rebound of his magic if that really happened. Link's battle experience hence allowed him to make the correct decision. He maintained the tempo of his assault and ignored the undead Warrior who slipped through his magic bombardment.

The glass orbs continued firing off from Link's staff at a fast pace similar to drops of rainwater traveling parallel to the ground, preventing the other undead Warriors from making it past the boundary.

As for the undead warrior who managed to escape, Link waited patiently until it was right beside him, before giving it a violent kick on the knee. These undead Warriors were weak, probably only around the strength of a Level-2 Warrior. It also did not expect a Magician to attack using a physical move, and took the full impact of the hit.

Link still had the buff of Jaguar's Agility and possessed unusual strength. He shattered the kneecap of the undead with one hit, causing it to fall helplessly to the ground. However, the undead did not give up. It flailed around on the ice platform and managed to get a slash on Link's thigh. It was an extremely deep cut which revealed the bones underneath.

A sharp pain shot through Link's body which affected his concentration. The violent magic assault took a temporary hiatus which gave the undead an opening to get closer to Herrera.

However, in the next moment, the violent wave of glass orb attacks resumed, and rose to an even higher frequency than before, forcibly pushing back the undead for another 1.5 feet. Link gritted his teeth and ignored the pain from his wound. This time, he included the undead who slipped through the previous wave of attacks into his calculations and fired a glass orb through his brain, effectively remedying his mistake.

Three seconds remaining.

To an ordinary human, three seconds might not even be enough to complete a sentence. However, Link could fire at least 45 glass orbs in this duration.

To Link, it was a painfully long time.

The siege of the undead became fiercer than before, while Link was now struggling with a splitting headache and a burning body. After a long period of concentration and Mana consumption, Link's body was starting to feel exhausted. He was constantly out of breath and barely had enough oxygen to sustain his energy consumption.

He was nearly at his limit.

"One, two, three..." Link subconsciously counted the number of glass orbs he fired. He had no idea when he was going to lose consciousness and was relying on his willpower to hang on.

Link's vision had completely blurred. However, at the corner of his eye, he noticed a huge shadow advancing towards the ice platform. It was the hydra that was forced to retreat! Now that it was fully revitalized, it had once again picked Link as its target.

"You still dare to come over?"

Link sneered and fired a whistle in the midst of his routine, risking his life by ignoring the tempo of his assault.

Shhhh! With a sharp piercing screech, the whistle accurately pierced the hydra's wound.

The hydra grunted in pain and stared at Link in disbelief. It once again stopped in its tracks. However, the whistle spell interrupted Link's original battle tempo, causing the undead to narrow the distance between them to merely three feet apart. It would not be long before Link was in range of their physical attacks.

"The time is up!" Link felt a huge surge of energy behind him. He knew that Herrera had completed channeling her Level-6 spell, Edge of Zenith.

Link heaved a sigh of relief. This knowledge seemed to revitalize him with energy, allowing him to resume his magic bombardment to its original state, pushing back the undead once again. Link had cast the Glass Orb spell so many times that it was almost second nature to him. He could already fire them instinctively without focusing much on the formation of magic structure and accumulation of elemental energy.

"It seems like the time I need to construct the magic formation of the Glass Orb spell is now negligible. Did I somehow enter the State of Gibraltar?" Link laughed.

The State of Gibraltar was a special Supreme Magic Skill that referred to a state of the soul after casting the same spell for a long time at an extremely fast pace. It was said that the soul would be integrated into the spell and form a soul magic formation, a rare phenomenon that was rarely seen.

A spell formation appearing in a soul would remove the need to construct any form of magic formation, effectively reducing spellcasting time. Coupled with the Domingo Crystal, Link could almost fire a glass orb instantaneously. At that moment, Herrera rose from her position.

Her body emitted a brilliant glow comparable to that of the sun before condensing into a 150 feet long sword of light. The sword was crystal clear with blinding light emanating from its blade. It swung towards Inosa much like a god passing judgment on a ferocious beast. Without a doubt, Inosa's body was completely severed.

At that moment, Link's Mana Points were also completely depleted, putting a stop to his State of Gibraltar and naturally, his bombardment of glass orbs. This was the

chance the group of undead had been waiting for. They rushed desperately forward, the nearest one already making contact with Link's body.

As Link was about to get overwhelmed by the horde of undead, Herrera's gentle voice rang through the atmosphere, "Sacred Sanctuary!"

Sacred Sanctuary

Level-4 Defensive Spell

Effect: Creates a powerful nine-foot light barrier, extremely effective against the dark forces.

(Note: Angel of Light specific spell)

A glorious light emerged and enveloped Link in a blinding glow. The group of undead were all forced to retreat.

Link was safe.

He took a deep breath and sat down on the ice platform, wiping the sweat from his forehead. In the last 20 seconds, he fired 15 glass orbs per second on average, killing near 300 undead in total.

His Mana Points were now completely depleted. If Herrera were to channel her magic for a few more seconds, he would have had to use the 100 Omni Points he kept as a triumph card.

Herrera entered the protection of the Sacred Sanctuary and immediately rushed towards Link, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine, just that I am out of Mana. What about you?" Link sighed. He still had a splitting headache, but it was a trifling matter compared to the depletion of his Mana Points.

Herrera also had a pained expression, "Mine as well. I can at most cast one more Level-4 spell."

One Level-4 spell had a maximum offensive power of a Flame Blast spell. If it was cast at the right time, it could probably take out 100 undead Warriors, provided that they were clustered tightly together. However, they still had at least 600 undead Warriors

circling them at this point, all fairly dispersed.

"It seems like we have to deal with the Necromancer another day." Herrera was disappointed.

The unexpected appearance of Inosa drained them of their Mana. In their current state, even if they could find a way to enter the Mage Tower, they would not make it out alive. Since the chances were slim, there was no reason for them to continue. The 100 Omni Points could be used to help them escape from their predicament.

In the Black Mage Tower.

...

Shade heaved a sigh of relief. Before the battle began, he never expected the two Magicians to put up such strong resistance. He thought he would simply win by a landslide.

In the end, he lost Inosa, his three strongest undead Warriors, and over 300 ordinary undead Warriors. The incandescent Edge of Zenith, and the impossibly fast spellcasting struck fear into his heart. If he had faced them head on, he would have had no chance of winning.

"To attain this amount of strength at such a tender age. What a waste that I have to kill them." Shade shook his head in pity. Despite some losses, he was still the ultimate victor.

On the ice platform, the Sacred Sanctuary was starting to fade. Herrera spoke apologetically, "Link, I should not have dragged you into the war between the light and dark forces. I am sorry."

She should have waited until Link became even more powerful, at least at a level where these undead warriors could do nothing to hurt him. Judging from his growth rate, it should not be a long time. She was simply too anxious and endangered him instead.

Link was confused, "We have not even gotten to the last step, what are you talking about?"

Herrera smiled, "Stop lying to me. Your Mana is completely depleted. Even if you still

have a powerful spell up your sleeve, you will not be able to cast it. I am also at my limit and can release at most two more Level-4 spells with the help of a mana recovery potion. There is no way we can escape."

Their nightmare would not end even after eliminating all the undead Warriors in sight. The Necromancer was still nowhere to be seen. They were already exhausted, but their opponent was still completely unscathed.

From Herrera's perspective, this was a hopeless situation!

Chapter 112

No Regrets

Link was confused by Herrera's words at first, but he quickly understood what she meant. He knew that Herrera had misunderstood him. The in-game Omni Point system was definitely something that the people of Firuman would not be able to understand. The most distinguishing feature of the system was its secrecy. No one could determine the potential of his strength unless he decided to purchase a spell with the Omni Points. Only then would it be transformed into real power. As a result, Herrera thought he was lying all along.

"No, listen to me, it's not what you think." Link was already prepared to use his Omni Points to purchase an escape spell.

Herrera shook her head, "Link, you must live!" She had already made her decision upon the realization that they were trapped. She would protect Link with all her might, even if it meant sacrificing her life!

Link was even more surprised after hearing those words. What does she mean? Does she also have a hidden triumph card?

He was just about to probe deeper when Herrera grabbed him by the hand. Link immediately felt a warm power surge through his palms and spreading through his body, slowly becoming one with his soul.

This was an extremely powerful force. In an instant, his fatigue from the high-speed spellcasting previously had disappeared and his splitting headache was cured. Even the deep cut on his thigh was healing at a rate visible to the naked eye.

Link then looked at Herrera in shock. She was getting weaker by the second, her golden blonde hair turning white and her pair of clear dark blue eyes losing the glow it had. She seemed to be transferring some of her core powers to Link.

What kind of power is this? Link was bewildered and struggled to free himself from Herrera's iron grip. However, his body seemed to be fixed in place by a certain force and he could only stare at Herrera unbelievably. "Stop what you are doing now!" Link

shouted.

"I am an Angel of Light, and my mission is to assist the Chosen One. Link you must leave this place alive!" Herrera accelerated the transfer of energy. In order to prevent Link from escaping, Herrera hugged him tightly.

Her body was enveloped in an incandescent glow. It was neither glowing with the authority of overflowing Mana, nor from the presence of a powerful spell, but with a kind of brilliance that penetrated deep into Link's soul.

A pair of wings could be seen in the midst of this glory. It was the true form of an Angel of Light.

She is burning her own soul! Link suddenly understood.

A soul was the foundation of life, containing incredible energy capable of powerful magic. An ordinary person would not be able to destroy his soul through any means. However, a Magician could temporarily attain terrifying strength by burning their souls. When Anthony was fighting Demon Tarviss in the game, he burned his soul to cast a Level-8 spell in order to force Tarviss to retreat. This meant that the Magician would disappear from the world forever!

Herrera looked up at Link and smiled, "Master Anthony taught me this spell. He once told me that I would eventually meet a person that I deem worth sacrificing my soul to save in this world. Link, you must live!"

Master also said that while Magicians are strong, we are not gods. We will definitely experience times of despair and moments of helplessness. If we do not want to leave any regrets, why not end our lives in a spectacular blazing glory. Master, I can now fully understand. Herrera thought.

Herrera did not feel a tinge of sadness or longing for the living world. Her smile was vivid and pure, one as untouchable as the pure white lotus blooming on top of a snow-capped mountain. Link was devastated.

He had experienced the Change of the Bloody Moon and many fierce battles ever since he stepped into this world. He had witnessed true darkness and personally ended countless lives as well. He had unconsciously become more unfeeling and cold as the days passed.

In the past few months, none of the things that happened was of great impact to him, including Lucy's torture, the appearance of Rylai and even Darris' ambush—all of which merely created slight waves in his stone cold heart.

"I have been chasing greater power all this time. While magic is fascinating, it also has the power to make people lose themselves in the process."

Link had come to a realization. The path of learning magic was a lonely one, one full of temptations and self-discovery.

Link had almost lost his way. He had already forgotten the reason for his pursuit of magic in the first place. He was simply seeking more power for the sake of becoming stronger, even planning to research into the dark Occultic Rune in his dimensional pendant when he had the time. If he continued down this path, he would end up like Bale.

However, Herrera's burning soul scattered the shadows lying in his heart.

Am I really worthy of her sacrifice? The dark forces are growing stronger by the day. In the game, even the God of Light is on the verge of getting destroyed, what must I do? Link asked himself.

The future of Firuman was more uncertain than before. Naturally, Link would not have the answers to these questions. Even the gods were clueless as to what the future held.

What was he meant to do? What would he eventually do? Only time would tell. No matter how the future would play out, Link would never be able to forget this scene.

He felt his Maximum Mana and Mana potential increasing exponentially. He knew that this would increase his power to an unbelievable stage, but he could not accept this power!

A living Angel of Light who was also a powerful Magician would be a strong ally in their fight against the dark forces. Herrera even had the potential to reach the stage of a Legendary Magician!

Link would not allow Herrera to sacrifice herself! Furthermore, it was not even a dead end! Link knew that he would not be able to stop Herrera with normal means.

"Herrera, if you don't stop right now, I'll kill myself!" Link had to use extreme tactics.

Link then accumulated mana in his body and was prepared to form a Flame Blast spell in his body. The intense heat of the fireball itself would be sufficient to kill a human.

Herrera was stunned and immediately stopped the transfer of energy. The glow enveloping her body dissipated and a lock of white hair now draped over her shoulders. Link simply hoped that there were no other side effects and that Herrera could recover from this devastating spell.

Supporting Herrera's weak body, Link said, "You fool, why did you not believe me when I said that I have a plan?"

Herrera simply laughed, "I saw it. They were lying in the deepest part of your soul. It was the glory of the God of Light."

Herrera awakened her Eye of the Soul briefly when she was burning her soul, and was able to peer into the deepest part of Link's soul.

It was a strong and pure soul, one only a holy spirit would possess. At the deepest part of his soul was a pure godly power. It was extremely well hidden, and Herrera could only perceive it due to a combination of several factors.

Firstly, it was because she was an Angel of Light. Secondly, Link had opened up his heart to her after seeing her sacrificial act. Lastly, she was unusually calm at that time.

Link was surprised that Herrera managed to see the true origin of his power.

Link then checked his own stats and realized that there were already some major changes.

Link Morani

Level-3 Magician

Mana Recovery Speed: 100/hour

Maximum Mana: 1800 points.

Current Mana Points: 932

Status: Angel of Light Blessing (Permanent) – dispels all negative statuses and allows

the user to absorb the power of light elementals from the sun, gradually recovering health and Mana Points

Although Link stopped the transfer of power in time, he still received a portion of Herrera's power. However, the thing that caught his eye was his Maximum Mana. It was now at 1800 points!

Link remembered clearly that there was a Level-10 Legendary spell that only needed 1800 Mana Points to cast.

Coincidentally, he also had 100 Omni Points to purchase this spell. He simply had to fully replenish his Mana to cast a Legendary spell! On the other hand, his body had to withstand the toxins from two bottles of mana recovery potion, as each bottle would only recover 500 Mana Points.

He was willing to take the risk.

"Damn you Necromancer. I will show you the power of a Legendary spell!" Link's eyes shone with resolve.

Chapter 113

Dimensional Jump

Even though Link could now purchase a Legendary-level spell, he still had to consider all the possibilities before making a final decision.

Right now, he had two options before him.

Firstly, he could choose to run away. An Angel of Light had blessed his soul, all his attributes were now full, plus he had 100 Omni Points, so escaping shouldn't be too hard for him. Once they were safely out of here, they could then go back and gather reinforcements to kill the old turtle.

From the perspective of safety and survival, this would be the best plan because it involved the smallest risk. Except there was one hiccup – Bale and Shade weren't fools. The minute they found out that Link and Herrera had escaped, they wouldn't be foolish enough to stay here and wait for them to come back with reinforcements.

The world was vast, and they could hide anywhere and not be found again. Or they might go straight to the North, to the Dark Elf kingdom – they would surely be welcomed there. That would also mean that Norton kingdom's enemy would gain two more powerful Magicians.

The second option was to use the Legendary-level spell, enter this turtle shell of a Mage Tower with Herrera and face the Necromancer head on!

How hard can your shell be? Is it barbed with spikes too? Are you sure those spikes won't turn on you and stab you to death? Well I'll meet you inside your Mage Tower, and we'll see how soft and defenseless the old turtle is without its shell! These were the thoughts that ran through Link's mind as he considered the plan.

Although this strategy had the element of surprise going for it, it was also potentially dangerous. Indeed, it was possibly life-threatening.

The Mage Tower was the opponent's own territory. He'd most likely have a large number of magic seals that he could use. The only way they could defeat them was

through a surprise attack where the opponents were caught off guard.

Right now, there were only 13 seconds left before the shield, Sacred Screen that Herrera had cast over both of them would collapse. And outside the shield the undead army was already surrounding them, waiting for the moment they could get to them to attack.

They must decide quickly!

"If I had a way to get us into the Mage Tower," said Link hastily, getting straight to the point, "And we join our forces together to fight against Bale and the Necromancer, do you think we have a chance of winning?"

Herrera's knowledge of magic was much deeper than Link's, so he regarded her views as highly valuable.

Herrera was taken aback by the question, but this time she didn't doubt Link's words. She considered his question for three seconds.

"You haven't used your Domingo crystal, have you?" she asked.

There was a sign of weakness and exhaustion in her voice. Although Link managed to interrupt her blessing just in time, it was obvious that her power was greatly reduced. She would probably need to recuperate for at least half a year before she could fully recover.

Link nodded; even in the direst of situations, he still reserved the fire elements stored inside the crystal, just in case. With it, Link could unleash a Flame Blast fireball in one second!

Herrera then took out a bottle of mid-level Mana potion and gulped it down. This restored 500 points of Mana to her body. She then turned to Link.

"Judging from the Mana fluctuations around the Mage Tower," she said, "The Necromancer should be a Level-5 Magician. Although Bale is a Level-6 Magician, he's old and frail, and his reaction time is much slower than ours. If we attack them when they least expect it, I think we can defeat them!"

In any magic battle, even slight advantages over the opponents could often decide victory or defeat!

The moment Link heard Herrera's words, Link knew no matter how big the risk was in attacking the Mage Tower, it was worth taking.

He immediately went to the spell menu and selected the list of Level-10 Legendary spells. The list then quickly appeared and Link skimmed through it and his eyes were immediately caught by a glowing spell card. There you are!

Dimensional Jump

Level-10 Legendary Spell

Mana Consumption: 1800

Effects: The spellcaster, along with other people or things connected to him will be teleported to any point in space chosen within half a mile.

(Note: This spell can override any magic barrier below the Legendary level.)

This spell was a high-level group teleportation spell, and it allowed for long-distance teleportation – even up to slightly more than half a mile. But what was most impressive about the spell was the fact that it was practically unchallenged and invincible.

This reason for this was simple – at this point there were very few Magicians who had reached Legendary level, so virtually no one could stop him. He could jump from one point to the next and back again as he wished and jump to wherever he wanted as no one was able to obstruct the spell.

Are you sure you want to learn this Legendary spell? The gaming system asked.

Yes! This was the last trick he had up his sleeve.

Ding! Link saw this bright Legendary-spell card disappear from the interface, and at the same time, he felt an intense heat spread throughout his body, then unimaginable pain all over.

Just as Link couldn't hold in his scream any longer, the pain quickly disappeared like a dream. Link assumed that it was some subtle but crucial modification of his body done by the gaming system to allow him to unleash a Legendary-level spell.

Three seconds later, a notification popped up on the interface.

Spell learning complete. The player has mastered Dimensional Jump.

Link could feel the change within his body. He then turned to Herrera.

"My lady," said Link jokingly, "Do you still have any mid-level Mana potions left?"

"Of course." Herrera then took out a bottle. She knew Link's body could withstand the toxicity of one potion now.

"No," said Link, shaking his head as he reached out for the potion, "I need three of them."

Because of Herrera's blessing on his soul, his body was now a blank slate and he could definitely handle a bottle of Mana potion. The second and third bottle might cause some damage to his body, but in this situation, it would be a necessary sacrifice.

What does he need so much Mana for? Herrera was bemused, but this was no time to be asking questions now. She saw how persistent and resolute Link was, so she relented and gave him three Mana potions.

The moment the bottles reached his hand, Link gulped them down without any hesitation. He didn't feel any changes when he drank the first one, but by the second bottle his stomach began to burst into a pain that was so intense that he almost doubled over.

"You're out of your mind, it's going to kill you!" said Herrera, appalled.

"Don't worry, I can handle it!" assured Link with a chuckle, his hand rubbing his stomach. He then cast the Blizzard spell on his belly to freeze it momentarily.

Link's stomach started to feel numb under the spell, and the pain gradually subsided.

He checked his Mana again and found that it had been fully replenished. He then turned to Herrera and said, "Let's prepare for battle!"

"Yes!" Herrera nodded, she wasn't sure what kind of trick Link was going to use, nonetheless she'd made up her mind that she would trust him.

With her wand in hand and her Mana surging, she was ready to unleash a Level-4 spell in 1.2 seconds as soon as she encountered the opponents.

A Level-4 spell in 1.2 seconds – that was the miraculous skill she developed thanks to her innate ability as an Angel of Light and her own hard work in creating a Supreme Magic Skill. The only catch was that she could only do it once a day.

Nonetheless, this spell, combined with Link's lightning-speed Flame Blast, had given her the confidence that they could defeat their opponents.

Two powerful Level-4 spells both cast in little more than a second – any Magician in the world, no matter how mighty they were, would be hard-pressed to defend themselves against that. And any Magician below the Legendary level would be brought to their knees if they were taken completely off guard by these attacks. In fact, Herrera was sure even the Dean Anthony wouldn't be able to defend himself in this case.

Link smiled then wrapped his hand around Herrera's waist. Her waist felt soft and delicate in his hand and he thought it felt quite comfortable to be holding her like that.

"Hold on tight! We're finally going to meet that turtle of a Necromancer in his shell!"

Herrera took a deep breath and braced herself for whatever she was going to face next. But even so, nothing could've prepared her for what happened next.

"Oh, the glorious Lord of Light!" she couldn't help but whisper.

She saw Link suddenly put the wand away, then stretch his hands out and form into knife-hands. His hands glowed in a transparent water-like aura, but when it extended out into the air, a light blue electric arc appeared.

Soon after, the electric arc began to expand until Link and Herrera were surrounded by it, creating a light sphere. Then the electric arc was dispersed out from the light sphere and into the surroundings.

Then the space outside of the light sphere began to undergo a peculiar change. It got darker and darker, like day turning into night. Then, in the darkness a white feather-like light emerged and it glowed and glimmered like a beautiful aurora.

This fantastical aurora lasted for about half a second and then it disappeared

completely—they found that they were now somewhere else.

The dense white mist had disappeared and was replaced by a dark hall instead. There was a dark green pool in the center of the hall, gurgling and bubbling and releasing a purple gas. There was no sign of Bale, but in the corner of the hall there was a brightly shining magic seal, of which in the center stood a man. He was wearing a large cloak and where his eyes should be there were two green glowing flames that looked like will-o'-wisps.

At this moment, Herrera stood there motionless with a thousand thoughts spinning in her mind.

Wasn't that a dimensional spell? But how did Link cast it with his bare hands? How could he bring another person with him? Didn't we just get teleported from more than half a mile away? But that's an impossibly huge distance!

Herrera was completely dumbstruck. She couldn't understand how it was possible for Link to use a Legendary-level spell. Everything about what just happened had simply undermined all the knowledge about magic that she had acquired so far.

Inside the Mage Tower, the Necromancer was similarly astounded. He had seen everything on the Magic Mirror – from the moment Link cast the Legendary spell to the moment they disappeared in the midst of the dense white mist more than half a mile away out of thin air. And now, just moments later, they had materialized right in his hall, right before his eyes.

"No, it's impossible!" Shade was so flabbergasted he stood there with his eyes staring fixedly at the two opponents materializing before him.

This Mage Tower, like any regular Mage Tower, was protected by a magic barrier that would prevent intrusion from dimensional spells and teleportation. And that was why he had been confidently looking through the Magic Mirror to monitor their movements without worrying about the possibility of being attacked himself.

But right now, the two Magicians had successfully broken into his Mage Tower when he was in a virtually defenseless state!

Chapter 114

Instant K.O

Necromancy Mage Tower.

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The only person who understood what happened was Link.

He drank the third Mana Recovery potion without hesitation, overloading his body with more toxins. Even with his abdomen frozen, he could still feel the burning sensation searing through his intestines.

The accumulation of toxins in his body had also begun to affect his nervous systems. He was having double vision and a pulsing sensation in his brain. He was somehow maintaining consciousness through all these discomforts.

Link bit his tongue to jolt himself sober. He could not afford to lose focus now.

Link had 500 Mana Points after drinking the potion as his Mana was completely depleted from the Dimensional Jump spell. He then pinched Herrera on the arm to signal her it was time to attack.

"Charge!"

Link hollered and held the Domingo Crystal in his arms, extracting the fire elementals stored inside the crystal to the tip of his wand, already set up with the magic formation of a Flame Blast spell.

After 1.1 seconds, a burning incandescent fireball appeared at the tip of the wand. Link's eyes darted across the hall, actively searching for Bale while he was channeling the spell.

The plan was simple. Link would keep Bale occupied while Herrera dealt with the Necromancer. However, Bale was nowhere in sight. When the Flame Blast spell was fully formed, Link did not release it immediately in case of any emergencies.

Herrera raised her crystal staff towards Shade and started casting her spell. After 1.2 seconds, she whispered, "The Light of Zenith!"

Light of Zenith

Level-4 Light Element spell

Casting Time: 2.5 seconds.

Mana Cost: 600 points.

Effect: Creates a high-temperature light sword with strong purifying powers. All Level-5 and below spells will be purified directly.

(Note: Herrera's triumph card)

This spell was extremely difficult to master and the original time needed to cast this spell was 2.5 seconds. Herrera not only finished the entire spellcasting process in a second, she even managed to enhance the spell with Supreme Magical Skills. A pure white light sword one-foot-long in diameter appeared in her hand. She swung the sword towards Shade, giving him no time to react.

Flame Blast and The Light of Zenith! How can they cast it so fast! Shade was completely bewildered, the two green flames around him dancing more vigorously than before. Although he knew it was a dead end, his instincts were to immediately set up a defensive spell.

Purple magic runes started surrounding his body, and it only took a second before a defensive barrier was set up. This was even faster than Herrera's Light of Zenith casting time!

"Dark Runic Barrier!"

The reason for the fast casting time was the magic formation Shade had prepared way beforehand. He merely had to activate the magic formation to release the spell. This was his backup plan in case he ever got ambushed.

Dark Runic Barrier

Level-5 Defensive spell

Effect: Generate a barrier with dark element particles before enhancing it with runes. Effective against both physical and magical attacks.

This was the only magic formation Shade had that could be released in his Mage Tower. His other magic formations were all built to release external attacks. He had few visitors and was a Necromancer, he hence fully focused his offensive power to the outside of the tower where most, if not all, of his threats came from.

As a Necromancer, he also could not openly purchase raw materials on the market as well. He had to be calculative with the way he used his limited resources.

This Dark Runic Barrier was to be used in case of an emergency.

To think the day would come so soon!

Boom!

The collision of the light and dark spells caused a deafening explosion.

Although the Light of Zenith was a Level-4 spell, it was enhanced with both Supreme Magical Skills and Herrera's inner gift for light elemental magic. Furthermore, Herrera's staff was also an item of the Legends—this spell had offensive power way higher than ordinary Level-4 spells.

Beams of light refracted off the dark elemental barrier and hit the walls of the Mage Tower. The refracted light reduced all it touched to rubble and quickly weakened the strength of the Dark Runic Barrier.

In the end, only one damaged dark rune was left circling Shade.

"A strong light spell indeed, but it was not enough," Shade spoke, sounding defeated. He had already seen the Flame Blast spell that Link had channeled.

Defending against the Light of Zenith did not mean anything. His Dark Runic Barrier could never defend against two consecutive Level-4 spells. He knew he would have lost from the very beginning.

Link had finally given up on his search for Bale. However, he was still wary and kept his Flame Blast spell unreleased, waiting for Herrera to cast a new spell.

Keeping the Flame Blast spell in his arsenal would not only ensure their safety against Bale, but also deter Shade from going on the offensive. Link was not planning to give up that vantage point.

In this time, Herrera did two things. First, she activated her defensive magic equipment, releasing a Level-4 Defensive spell, Light Guarding Barrier.

The spell only took 0.5 seconds to appear, providing protection to both Herrera and Link.

Secondly, she started channeling a new Light of Zenith spell. It would take longer for her to cast it this time, but with the deterrence from Link's Flame Blast spell and the protection from the Light Guarding Barrier, she had more than enough time.

Even if Bale appeared, they would be able to react in time.

Shade was furious to see Link handling the situation with such arrogance. To think that Link would continue to put him down instead of ending the battle with his spell.

"I will make you pay for looking down on me!" Shade started his retaliation. Mana surged into his stage and a black skeleton swiftly took form. This was a Level-5 secret dark elemental spell, Shadowed Skeleton.

If his spell was successful, at least one of them would be seriously injured.

However, Link was still calm and collected.

Link might seem to be bursting with arrogance. However, no one here knew that he was once revered as an Archmage by many!

As an Archmage, he was extremely observant of every move his opponent made. He knew that this Shadowed Skeleton was simply an ordinary Level-5 spell without any Supreme Magical Skill enhancements.

Since it was an ordinary spell, its spellcasting time could be easily deduced.

To be able to tell the spellcasting time from the fluctuation of magic waves was part of the fundamentals of being a Magician.

Link happened to be extremely skilled at this.

Herrera's Light of Zenith spell would take form earlier than Shade's Shadowed Skull spell—it should be a 0.3 second time difference.

In this time, Link did not sense any additional magic wave fluctuations in the hall. Convinced that Bale would not be able to change the tide of the battle even if he attacked now, Link fired his Flame Blast spell without any hesitation.

The fireball flew across the hall and struck the remaining dark rune with full force.

Boom! A loud explosion rang through the hall followed by a blast of heat.

Fire elemental spells were known for its offensive power and Flame Blast was one of the most destructive ones. Link's spell penetrated through the weakened Dark Runic Barrier in an instant.

The fireball exploded and engulfed Shade in flames. In the midst of the dancing crimson flames were some black flames, caused by the forced interruption of Shade's spellcasting.

Shade screamed in agony. While he had an immortal body, fire elemental spells were the bane of all Necromancers. Under the burning effect of magical flames, the endless pain directly assaulted his soul.

Furthermore, the interruption of his Level-5 spell resulted in the fearsome rebound of his magic.

Shade could only writhe in pain.

The effect of Flame Blast dissipated after three seconds. Shade collapsed helplessly onto the ground, his robe thoroughly burned; all that remained was a charred skeleton.

His staff was also broken and the green flames in his eyes flickered weakly. He was defeated and had lost all power to resist.

Shade's Mage Towers were next to useless in this direct confrontation.

Link and Herrera made use of their advantage which allowed them to maximize their strength, overwhelming Shade with a calculated outburst of power and perfect cooperation.

Shade could not help but curse, "How can it be! How could I have failed?"

He had a Mage Tower which extended his range by miles. He also had a huge army of undead at his command. His only consideration in battles was how many minions would he be losing.

Complete failure on his side never seemed possible to him. Even if it was Dean Anthony, Shade was fairly certain of his victory as long as Anthony was traveling alone.

However, he was indeed defeated, at the hands of two young Magicians.

"Where is Bale?" Herrera asked coldly.

She still had not released her Light of Zenith, planning to keep it as a threat.

"I don't know," Shade gritted his teeth.

Bale's transformation was almost complete. It was his only chance at turning the tables around. But just as he spoke, Link spoke, "Look, there seem to be something in the pool."

Observation skills were one of the essential qualities a Magician must possess. Link had been looking for Bale this entire time, there was no way the pool could escape his eyes.

Shade was forlorn of hope.

Chapter 115

Big Rewards!

In the Necromancer's Mage Tower.

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Bale was dragged out of the dark green pool with the Magician's Hand, and the condition of his body was revolting!

The Magician's robe he wore had been completely corroded by the water of the pool, so he was now stark naked. Folds of eroded gray skin were riddled with holes, and in places even the bones and internal organs were visible. From inside his body in between the internal organs, a foul-smelling dark green mucus oozed out.

He was oblivious to what was happening to him and seemed to be in a deep sleep. His eyes had been eroded away, leaving only two black holes where his eye sockets were. But what was most disturbing was the sight of that eerie smile he wore on his grotesque goblin-like face.

Link took a glance at Bale and understood right away what was going on.

"He's turning into a Lich!" said Link, "The transformation is almost complete. He'll wake up soon."

Herrera took a deep breath. Her eyes betrayed shock and disgust, and she turned silent for half a minute. Then she pointed her wand toward Bale and said, "Mana Lock!"

Mana Lock

No Spell Level

No Mana Consumption.

Effects: Seals the Mana in the spell target's body for a certain period of time, blocking

the opponent's ability to cast any magic spells.

(Note: The spell's effect is very powerful, but it must be cast when the target is in a state where they cannot resist the spell.)

Bale was currently unconscious, so naturally he was not able to resist. Once the Mana Lock was successfully cast, Bale would no longer pose any threats to them even when he woke up later.

The Necromancer Shade was severely wounded—he'd just been hit by a powerful backfire of the spell and his Flame of the Soul was almost extinguished, so he was now completely incapacitated. It was impossible for him to ever cast spells again; he was lucky enough to still be alive. Only then could Link and Herrera catch their breaths and feel that they were truly safe.

They both looked at each other and noticed how serious the other's injuries were. Especially Link, who seemed to have one foot already in the grave.

There was a deep slashed wound on his leg, his face had a deathly pallor, his nose and his mouth were bleeding, and his hands and feet were trembling wildly from the toxin poisoning of the Mana potion.

Now that everything was over, he stopped straining himself and slumped to the ground. Then he realized that he was so weak that he couldn't even sit up, so he let himself lie down. The toxin in the Mana potion turned out to be much more powerful than he imagined.

Herrera was much better than Link, she was only weakened because she'd used the secret soul spell on Link earlier. Once she saw Link collapsing, she rushed towards him then took out a bottle of pale green potion and gave it to him.

"I'm giving you mid-level detoxification potion," Herrera explained as she was helping Link to drink the potion, "It will save your life now, but you'll need to rest for at least 10 days to fully recover. You must not use magic at all in this period of time, otherwise there will be permanent residual effects from the toxins." As she spoke, she started cleaning Link's wounds.

The wound was caused by the claws of the undead army, so not only was it an external injury, Link was also infected with toxins from the undead. This was the reason why even though Link was injured not more than five minutes ago, it had already started

to fester and become swollen and dark green pus had even started to ooze out from it.

If the wound was not promptly dealt with, judging by Link's thin and quite frail physique, it might even become life-threatening.

Seeing the gruesome wound on Link's leg, Herrera's eyes began to tear up. She sat on the floor and held Link up in her arms and then took out a white crystal bottle.

Link looked over and saw the crystal bottle filled with translucent gel-like liquid; the liquid inside exuded a sacred and holy aura.

"Is that holy water?" asked Link softly.

"Yes, it is," answered Herrera, "I brought it with me to deal with any black magic forces and now it really is coming in handy. Brace yourself, it's going to hurt a little."

She then pulled open the cork and dribbled the holy water slowly onto the wound on Link's leg. There was a soft sizzle where the holy water touched the wound. Link saw a glaring white light emerging where from the wound and a green gas spewed out from it as well. A foul stench then spread to his nose, and at the same time he started to feel an incredible pain!

It felt as if someone had stabbed his leg with a knife then turned it around and kept pushing it down deeper into his flesh. Even while his whole body was numb by the toxin poisoning, the pain had managed to pierce through and dominate his whole senses. His body was trembling uncontrollably now, and he was about to let out a scream.

It really did hurt like hell!

But Link still managed to hold in his screams because the excruciating pain was greatly alleviated by Herrera, who was holding him gently in her bosom and was constantly caressing him to soothe his pain.

After about ten seconds, the pain in his leg slowly dissipated. Herrera held him in her arms the whole time—one hand was tenderly stroking his back.

It felt incredibly soothing. Link could smell the gentle fragrance that radiated from Herrera and it was so calming that it felt as if there was a tiny hand that had gently picked up the pain he felt on his leg and threw it far away from him.

A wise Sage had once said that the most comforting place in the world is the peak of a woman's chest. I thought it was just a joke then, but now...I guess it's true. Link wouldn't mind staying this way for a little longer.

After a long while, Herrera gently asked, "How do you feel now?"

"I feel much better now," murmured Link.

The second Link uttered the words, Herrera pushed him immediately away from the gentle embrace. To be honest, he still longed for that gentle touch and would love to experience it for a little longer.

Herrera's face was reddened, which was something that had never happened before. But after blessing Link's soul, she felt their souls were now intertwined and that they could keep no secret from each other. They were now a part of each other, and it confused her.

Herrera then checked Link's wound again.

"It should be fine now," said Herrera, visibly relieved.

"I feel like my strength has recovered somewhat. I think I can stand up now."

Link then tentatively moved his arm and found that the feeling of weakness in the body had been dissipated.

It turned out that the main culprit for the weakening his body wasn't potion poisoning after all, but was instead the toxic residues from the wound that was caused by the undead army instead.

Link didn't expect the toxin from the undead to be so deadly. It was just his luck that Herrera had brought the holy water along, otherwise he would undoubtedly be as cold as the ground by now.

After a while, Link stood up with Herrera's support. He then scanned around at the interior of the Mage Tower.

"What a crude Mage Tower. The whole interior was simply one big hall. The magic materials here are abundant though," said Link after a sigh.

These magic materials were all found in the magic seals. There was Mithril, Celestite, and other precious stones. There were also the bones, fur and hide from a variety of magical beasts and what excited Link most of all was Thorium!

Like Mithril, Thorium was also a Mana-conductive metal and it had the same silvery appearance. The most noticeable difference between the two metals was Thorium's extremely shiny surface, where it gleamed in a silvery light that looked just like the stars in the sky.

Thorium was ten times more conductive to Mana than Mithril. To speak in terms of electric conductivity, Mithril was equivalent to graphite, while Thorium was equivalent to copper.

Mithril was a general Mana-conductive metal in the Firuman continent and was widely used in low-level magic gear. But Thorium, on the other hand, had now begun to ascend in popularity due to its high quality. In fact, any magic gear of Level-4 or higher must now use Thorium as its core!

The value of Thorium was also ten times that of Mithril. One ounce of Thorium would cost about 3000 gold coins. Link then searched the entire Mage Tower and ultimately collected 4.5 ounces of Thorium from the core of magic seals. These were then pulled into threads as thin as the breadth of human hair and then they were bundled up together, forming into a small lump of Thorium the size of a thumb.

In addition to the Thorium, there was also 11 pounds of Mithril. There were still some miscellaneous trinkets and belongings apart from that, and overall, Herrera estimated the total value of their looting to be at least 40,000 gold coins.

To Link, this was a vast fortune!

To Herrera, however, the amount wasn't so impressive.

"This Necromancer is poor for a Level-5 Magician," she said

She had no interest in taking the loot, so she collected them all into a pile and pushed them towards Link.

"Link, you take all of it. Think of it as the reward for your role in investigating Bale," she said.

If it had been someone else, Link would've insisted on an equal share, but with Herrera, he could easily understand and accept her well intention. Since she didn't want the treasures herself and had also intended to give him the gold coins as the rewards for helping her, Link happily obliged. He only had 300 gold coins right now anyway, and that amount of gold coins to a Magician was simply pathetic and insufficient for anything at all. He knew the lootings would definitely come in handy.

He then cheerfully kept all these materials into his storage pendant.

By now, Link's energy had recovered a lot. He was now able to move freely, and his Mana had started to recover at a rate of 100 points per hour. The residual side effects from the Mana potion toxins turned out not to be as serious as Herrera had feared.

Still, this was no laughing matter. For his future's sake, Link resolved to use as little magic as possible in the next 10 days.

At that moment, Bale, who had been lying on the ground all along, began to move. His voice was grumbling in his throat. Immediately afterwards a foul green liquid oozed out of his mouth, and his head began to sway around while his four limbs began to flail in the air.

"He's waking up," said Link as he glanced at him.

Chapter 116

The World's Greatest Illusion

Bale had a nightmare.

He dreamed that he was transported to an extremely dark place, so dark that he could not even see his fingers. He also felt cold, a bitter and painful cold that penetrated through the thick fabric of his magic robe. He shivered uncontrollably. There was a howling blizzard all around him. This blizzard seemed to be alive, entering his body through his nose, ears and mouth, robbing him of his body heat.

Bale instinctively tried to create some sources of heat. However, he could not find his staff nor his magic equipment. When he attempted to cast spells using his bare hands, he realized that the Mana in his body had completely disappeared. It seemed that his magic had abandoned him.

"What exactly happened? Where am I?" Bale panicked.

In this desolate land, Bale resisted the pain of the bitter cold and braved the brewing snowstorm, losing track of time. It seemed like an eternity before Bale realized that he no longer felt the cold. The sinister aura continued to enter his body, though the uncomfortable sensation of cold air inside him seemed to have dissipated. He even felt more energetic than before.

"What happened? Am I going to die?" Bale was unable to understand the situation.

As time passed, Bale gradually realized that his state of vigor was not fading away and he was instead feeling more energetic by the minute. The piercing cold in his body now felt like a cool breeze. It had been a long time since he felt this level of energy.

How can it be? I am almost 70 years old, in my twilight years. Why do I feel like I am back in my twenties? Bale was puzzled. Suddenly, Bale was hit by a flashback.

Undead magic...immortality...Shade...I remember now, I was in Shade's Mage Tower and going through the transformation process in the pool. Does this mean that I have already succeeded? Bale thought with glee.

He slowly accustomed to his new body. His body was numb and far less sensitive than before, especially his sense of touch. The only thing that was clear was the cool breeze that surrounded him. Under the effect of this power, he became increasingly energetic.

Is this the power of darkness, it's not as scary as it seems, Bale thought.

Bale felt extremely comfortable in this state and relaxed his body as he waited for his transformation to be complete. However, things did not go as smoothly as he thought. Bale was rudely awakened by a loud bang.

What happened? Isn't Shade protecting the pool? What is the commotion about?

In an instant, Bale felt a tight squeeze on his body by a powerful force that pulled him out of the embrace of the cooling breeze.

What is going on! Bale felt his body being exposed to the air. When he tried to open his eyes, he realized that he could not see anything. He then heard the voice of a young man.

"Master Bale, you look even more revolting now than the rotting corpses I've seen along the way."

It was a familiar voice. Bale had definitely heard this voice somewhere. He searched his memory frantically for the owner of the voice. At that moment, another voice appeared, "Bale, you still took this path in the end."

It was an extremely clear and pleasing female voice. In Bale's memory, there was only one woman he knew who possessed this voice—it was Anthony's most cherished disciple, Moira.

The moment he identified Moira, he could slowly piece the puzzle together. He spoke in shock, "Moira and Link? How is this possible? Where is Shade?"

A weak and raspy voice could be heard, "Bale, I have failed."

"Just how many Magicians did the East Cove Higher Magic Academy send? How long has it been since the transformation started?" Bale was bewildered.

Even if the six-man council was present, it was not possible to defeat Shade in a short time if he had utilized the power of his Mage Tower. He was a Level-5 Necromancer!

Shade smiled forcefully, "It's just the both of them, and it's only been 40 minutes."

"But you have the Mage Tower..." Bale could not believe his ears.

Shade was prepared to answer but was interrupted by Herrera, "That is enough, Bale. As a respected master of the academy, you chose to dabble in dark magic and even willingly transformed yourself into this hideous creature. You have betrayed the glorious tradition of our academy. You shall receive judgment for your actions."

As this involved the secret to Link's unimaginable power as the Chosen One, Herrera did not want to reveal more information to Bale.

Bale shook this head. "No, please don't. I did not harm anyone; I only want to live! Moira, please let me go. I promise to disappear from this world forever and not appear in front of anyone from the academy. I will stop my research into dark magic as well."

He would be finished if he was brought back to the academy. Even if he was spared the death sentence, he would lose his freedom forever or even have his magic sealed. He would rather be dead.

"I'm sorry but that is not a decision I can make," Herrera refused.

Bale was not going to give up easily, "Moira, please, I do not wish to die. There is still so much I want to know about magic and dying now will leave me with too many regrets. Let me go just this once, give me a second chance to make amendments."

Herrera was slightly moved and fell silent. Before she awakened as an Angel of Light, she was just an ordinary human. As her senior in magic, Bale had given assistance her when she was still learning magic. In fact, she was still wearing a magic bracelet that Bale had given her during her coming of age ceremony.

Herrera was aware of what would happen if she brought him back to the academy. The thought of her once caring and wise senior Magician suffering such punishments pained her. However, it was definitely not enough to change her decision, it simply made it harder for her to refuse Bale's request.

Bale seemed to see some hope in this silence, "Moira, we have known each other for 30 years. I even watched you grow up! You know what kind of person I am; I have never done something against my conscience. Even this time, I did not harm anyone in the process of my dark magic research. Please let me go."

Herrera was at a loss for words.

"Master Bale, I think you are mistaken," Link stepped in.

"Yes?" Bale replied respectfully. He knew that his freedom depended on both Herrera and Link. He had to get on both of their good sides.

Link smiled and continued, "Your mistake lies in the fact that you do not realize the impact the dark forces have already had on you. Those Magicians who fell to the dark side held the same beliefs as you in the beginning. Some were just curious, while others, like you, only sought to gain immortality so that they could continue their research into magic. The majority of them did not wish to cause harm to the world. Shade, didn't you also start your research into dark magic only out of curiosity?"

Even Link was curious about the mysteries of dark magic. He even kept Tarviss' Occultic Rune and planned to study it in secrecy. However, after this incident with Bale, Link clearly saw the corrosive effects dark magic had on humans and had come to a decision. When he returned to the academy, he would find a suitable time to hand over the Occultic Rune.

He might have been able to acquire precious knowledge from the Occultic Rune. However, once he was exposed, he would lose Herrera's trust in him as the Chosen One. Between an Angel of Light who was willing to sacrifice her soul for him and an Occultic Rune which could offer him some insights but at the same time tempt him to the dark side—it was a clear choice which was better. No other option would make any sense.

Shade wanted to rebut but fell silent. It was true that he started his research only out of curiosity, but when he finally realized his mistakes, he could no longer turn back.

Bale was still in denial, "So what? Those Magicians simply had no willpower. I am different! I am a Master Magician; I can do it!"

Link laughed. The legendary Magician Bryant once said, "A mortal's self-control is the world's greatest illusion!"

Mortals had always placed great faith in their willpower, believing that they could control not only their actions but even manipulate the consequences of such actions. But this was all just a rosy picture they painted for themselves. Even Link had unknowingly been absorbed into the alluring mysteries of magic. If not for Herrera, he

would eventually end up on the wrong path as well.

The sight of Bale bursting with self-confidence irked Link. Link then revealed, "Let me tell you something. The potion that you used to complete your transformation was made from the souls of at least 100 humans! You can confirm this with Shade."

"Shade, is that true?" Bale was also startled.

Shade fell silent for a moment before admitting, "In order to balance out the corrosive powers of the darkness, I incorporated the essence of fresh blood into the potion. The blood essence requires at least a ton of fresh blood from humans. However, I only used the blood of slaves."

There were only about five liters of blood on average in a human's body. To extract a ton of blood would mean that 200 lives were taken. This number was way higher than what Link had estimated.

"Only from slaves? How moral and kind of you." Link laughed in disgust. "In order to achieve your immortality, 200 lives were sacrificed, and this was just the first step. Is this what you meant when you said you didn't want to harm anyone?"

"I was unaware of this!" Bale defended himself.

"Stop talking!" Herrera had enough. She looked at Bale in disappointment.

"Master Bale, when you heard that 200 lives were sacrificed for you, you did not show the slightest sense of guilt and remorse. Instead, all you could think of was to shirk your responsibility in the issue. You have already been corroded by the darkness, I will personally bring you back for your judgment!"

Bale knew that all his chances were lost. He finally unleashed the rage that had been building inside him, "Damn it! I am a member of the six-man council—I demand that you release me!" He was merely venting his emotions at this point.

Link stared at Herrera and said, "He has lost it."

"Link, who exactly are you? I am an established Magician, how dare you!" Bale growled in rage.

As an Angel of Light, Herrera felt the need to defend the Chosen One. She gravely

commanded, "Bale, Link's true identity is something far beyond your imagination. Be tactful with your words!"

"Go to hell! All of you!" Bale lost all sense of reasoning.

"Let's bring him back."

Shade was seriously injured while Bale was under the effect of a Restricting spell. It was a simple task to transport them back to the academy. Herrera cast a flying spell and brought them back without any delay.

After they left, two dark figures appeared in front of the dark Mage Tower. One of them spoke, "To think that they could defeat Shade."

"It was indeed unexpected. But that might not necessarily be a bad thing. Am I right?"

"Indeed. Although now it seems like we have to find a way to get Bale out of this mess."

Chapter 117

Anthony, the Dean of the Academy

Anthony was 63 years old, but unlike the doddering Bale, his body was still very healthy and strong and his hands and feet were as nimble as a young man's. He was also still full of energy and could most likely live up to a hundred years old.

At seven o'clock in the morning, he was still in the East Cove Magic Academy. But by 8 o'clock he was already in Springs city and he had been discussing with a large group of senior officers about the appointment of an army Magician. By 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he had basically decided on the most suitable candidate.

The expedition with the army would be a challenging task. Although the Magician would receive some special treatments, the expedition would still require a Magician with some physical strength. Therefore, the Magicians involved in the army were no older than 40 years old. In Anthony's view, one person who fit the position the most was Darris, the first genius of the younger generation in the academy.

At the young age of 30, Darris had already advanced to becoming a Level-4 Magician and his future looked very promising. Anthony saw the shadow of his own past in the young Darris, so he wanted to give him this chance to accumulate experience and prestige.

Originally, he had considered his disciple Herrera as well. Unfortunately, she was a woman, so she wasn't suited for the position. In the world of magic, there was no discrimination between men and women—in fact, there were many powerful female Magicians. But in this case, a beautiful woman like Herrera working among the army would probably be a bad idea.

At 6 o'clock in the evening, Anthony attended a sumptuous dinner that King Leon had specially prepared for him. After all the perfunctory greetings and social ceremonies, the time was already 8 o'clock. He then rushed to the palace of the portal tower of the palace, ready to go back to the academy.

So far, everything was in line with his plan, and nothing had happened that had diverted him from his schedule. Overall, he was satisfied with the trip to the capital

city this time.

Although Anthony didn't always like to attend these tedious meetings and dinners, he understood that it was his duty as the dean of the East Cove Magic Academy. The whole thing had wasted a whole day of his time, but now that everything was settled, he was eager to come back as soon as possible and hated wasting another second in the city.

Shrouded in the flickering glow of a magic aura, Anthony was finally back at the academy, the place where he spent nearly 40 years of his life. But as he was walking down from the portal tower, Antony frowned as he could sense that there was something amiss with the academy today.

Under the portal rune, Maxim, the Magician responsible for the maintenance of the portal tower, was standing there quietly with his brows slightly creased and his face gloomy. Anthony could instantly sense that something was troubling him.

"Maxim, what happened?" asked Antony with a frown. His white beard seemed to stand on its end, his nostrils were flared, and his thick lips and his round eyes were piercing. He didn't look manifestly angry then, but his features were nonetheless very imposing.

Maxim immediately bowed respectfully to the dean, then said in an overwrought voice, "Sir, there has been a problem."

"What is it?" asked the dean.

Anthony's face sank and the air around his body became depressed. The elements in his surroundings began to agitate while tiny tornados began to form in the air around him – these were the effects a powerful Level-7 Magician could exert on his surroundings.

Cold beads of sweat started to form on Maxim's forehead; he knew how tempestuous the dean's temper could be. Even though he had mellowed slightly with age, the oppressive air he exerted now when he was in a bad mood was enough to intimidate anyone. In fact, anyone not used to it might even be scared stiff by it.

"Sir, I don't yet have the details," said Maxim, "but all the Master Magicians have been waiting for you in the Hall of Truth, so you'll get much better information when you get there."

The Hall of Truth was where the academy's most important meetings were held. Only Magicians of Level-3 and higher were eligible to attend the meetings held here. Generally, these Magicians were the elites of the academy.

And right now, all of the Master Magicians were gathered there. Even Maxim, a Level-5 Magician was reluctant to reveal any details himself. Anthony surmised that the cause of this commotion must inevitably be grave indeed. His brows were now tightly knit together just from thinking about it.

He forced himself to maintain his composure and followed Maxim all the way to the northeast corner of the academy, to the Hall of Truth.

Along the way, they met some Magician's Apprentices who seemed to be oblivious to the dire situation looming over the academy. Their expressions bore no worry nor anxiety, and as they encountered the dean, they bowed at him and quickly scurried away.

This discovery made Anthony feel relieved. Although the current situation upset him deeply, he was still glad that the top officials had kept everything concealed from the apprentices. This thereby prevents the problem from being scandalized or spread panic throughout the academy.

Five minutes later, they arrived at the entrance to the Hall of Truth.

The magic barrier of the Hall of Truth had been activated and a purplish, semi-circular barrier enveloped the entire hall. This prevented anyone from the outside to overhear or use magic spells to spy on whatever was happening in the hall.

There was a thick and sturdy magic door in front of the hall. Maxim rushed in front and opened it for the dean. Through the door, Anthony noticed that there were not many people inside. There were only a handful of people there and most of them were white-haired, old Magicians.

Maxim did not enter the hall but stepped aside to let the dean in instead. Anthony took a deep breath and walked into the hall then immediately sealed the magic door behind him.

He glanced around the spacious hall and found that five Master Magicians were sitting at the long table for the academy's High Council. There were six members in the council: Grenci, Fendan, Vossmir, Hanswise, Andorras and Bale – all were present,

except Bale.

When they saw Anthony, all five rose to their feet and greeted the dean.

In the middle of the hall, a young man stood there with a familiar-looking young woman by his side. After a while he recognized the woman as his favorite disciple, Moira. The young man near her looked very young—he was probably no older than 20 years old. Yet Anthony could sense a very powerful aura surrounding him. He must be at least a Level-4 Magician.

"Who is this?" asked the very surprised Anthony. He'd never heard of a Level-4 Magician who was under 20 years old in this academy. Such a gifted Magician should be renowned throughout the Firuman continent. But who could this be? Could he be Wavier, the famous Magician from the South?

Wavier was a 19-year-old Magician whose Mana had already reached Level-4. He was known as the most gifted young Magician among mankind.

Link then took a step forward and with one hand on his chest and one hand behind him, he bowed respectfully.

"My name is Link Morani," said Link. "I am Magician Bale's apprentice."

"Link? Oh, it's you," said Anthony. "Yes, that's right, I remember reading your thesis...By the way, where is Bale?" Suspicions started to creep up on Anthony. If it really was a big problem, all six members of the council should be present. So why was Bale still missing?

This oddity had made him forget about his wonder and curiosity of the young Magician.

"Tutor," said Herrera, after a long sigh, "Bale is over there."

She then pointed towards the dark corner next to a statue. When Anthony looked over, he saw three figures on the wall, all of whom had been restrained by Mana Lock.

Anthony couldn't see very clearly at first glance, so he approached the figures and squinted his eyes to see better. When he could finally make out the identity of the figures on the wall, he unconsciously drew in a sharp breath.

Among the three, one of them was almost burnt to a crisp, with all the hair on his head charred. His breathing was labored and shallow. He looked terrible indeed, but not nearly as terrible as the other two beside him!

The other two had lost almost all of their flesh and muscle. All they had left was a layer of skin that covered their bones. They looked no different from bare skeletons. One of them had a glowing flame in his eyes like will-o'-wisps. And even though they had been restrained by Mana Lock, Anthony could still sense a faint but piercing cold aura radiating from these two.

"But that's a Lich!" shouted Anthony. "No, Bale, is that you?"

He knew that something terrible had happened, but he still wasn't prepared for such a shocking revelation.

Although Bale's appearance had changed beyond recognition, he was still someone Anthony had known for nearly 40 years, so he immediately recognized the ghoulish figure as his colleague and old friend Bale.

This man moved slightly, then let out a sigh heavy with regret.

"Yes, Anthony," said Bale. "It's me."

As things had progressed to this stage, Bale was now nothing but a heartbroken old man. He was no longer in the frenzied state that he was before.

"What happened?" asked Anthony in a desperate voice. He then walked towards them and pointed his wand at Shade. "Did he trick you?"

Anthony still couldn't believe that Bale, the Magician he'd known for all these years, would embark on the path of black magic.

"It was my own doing," said Bale. "My friend, I'm afraid I've let you down."

By now, Bale had already calmed down. Now that things had reached this point, he realized that whatever he'd done was irreversible, and he didn't even wish to keep on living. What he wanted most right now was a peaceful death.

Anthony sunk into a long silence. After that, he turned to Moira and said, "Moira, tell me what happened."

Herrera nodded. She then began explaining how she had accidentally sensed the aura of black magic on Darris and got suspicious, so she asked Link to help her investigate them. At last when the truth was discovered, Darris ambushed Link but was defeated by him. She then described how Bale had escaped to the black Mage Tower in Mist Basin and how he was defeated and captured there. She spilled out everything that had transpired, and apart from the exact details of the battles they fought, nothing was left out.

When she was done, Anthony took a long hard look at Link. Herrera had kept her words plain and simple, but the grave danger that they must've suffered through was apparent to Anthony. There were some strange points in Herrera's explanations that he found suspicious as well, though this wasn't the time to be asking those questions.

"My old friend," said Anthony as he turned to Bale, "do you have anything to add?"

"I've completely failed as a Magician," said Bale as he shook his head. He seemed dejected and grief-stricken. "I have nothing to say for myself."

"Darris, what about you?" asked Anthony, turning once again to Bale's chief disciple.

Darris had been seriously wounded, and now he had to face Anthony's imposing presence, the situation was almost too much for him that he felt breathless.

"I...I don't want to die!" he finally said.

Anthony let out a long sigh and went into silence for a long while. He then turned to the remaining five members of the council.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Bale may have chosen the wrong path, but I believe he had not really committed any serious crimes, and his knowledge and wisdom in the fields of magic remain valuable and impressive. I propose to permanently block his Mana and prevent him from ever being able to cast spells again, and to imprison him in the Tower of Azura. (Note: This is the academy's prison tower for Magicians who committed crimes.) As for Darris, he should be stripped of his magic powers and handed to the River Cove Town court to be tried for his crimes. And as for...him..."

"His name is Shade," said Herrera. "He's a Level-5 Necromancer."

"Yes, the Necromancer Shade," continued the dean, "As for him, I judge him to be guilty of the cruelest crimes, and I propose the Purge of Fire as his punishment."

The five Master Magicians then put their heads together and discussed the matter.

Some of them thought Bale's punishment to be too lenient in light of the clear evidence that proved he had indeed murdered a coachman of the academy. Yet, none of them brought this up because they didn't want to offend the dean. Bale was, after all, their long-time colleague, and despite all the wrongs he had committed, no one was willing to inflict harsh punishment on him. After much deliberation, the second most powerful Magician of the academy, Grenci, stood up and announced their verdict.

"Sir, we are all in agreement that your proposal was just and wise," said Grenci.

The matter was of the utmost importance and must only be decided by the highest officials of the academy, so Herrera and Link could only observe on the side and had no right to participate in the decision making. Once the verdict was reached, Bale, Shade and Darris' fates were then sealed forever, with no possible chance of alteration.

Bale hung his head low and said nothing. No one knew what thoughts were running through his head at that moment. Darris' eyes were lifeless by then and soon enough, he couldn't hold out anymore and collapsed to the ground. As for Shade, he was silent throughout the whole incident. He knew that he was finished the second his Flame of the Soul was severely injured, so he had long resigned himself to his fate.

Antony now turned to Herrera and Link and a glimpse of pride cropped up on his usually severe face.

"Both of you," the dean began, "have risked your lives to expose the darkness that lurked within the academy. And you've done it with careful discretion to preserve the good name and reputation of the academy. Your courage and wisdom deserve to be rewarded!"

Chapter 118

Hefty Rewards

The Hall of Truth.

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After Anthony revealed the specific rewards, Link almost let out a laugh. Naturally, with a group of serious high-level Magicians around, he could only keep this joy in his heart and maintain a calm composure.

Anthony was extremely generous. As one of the only two people involved in the mission, Link received 5000 gold coins as a reward.

That was not all.

The most important thing to a Magician was not gold coins. Wealth was simply a means to an end, which was of course, attaining magic-related items such as magic books, magic equipment, alchemy potions, magic scrolls, raw materials and so on.

Apart from the wealth, Link also received 100 pieces of thorium!

Previously, when he looted all the magic equipment from Shade's Mage Tower, he only acquired a total of 123 pieces of thorium. He never imagined that he would receive 100 more in the form of a mission reward. thorium cost at least 10000 gold coins if sold at market price.

With all these magic materials, Link would have a better foundation to work with when he resumed his magic study.

After announcing the tangible rewards, Anthony continued, "Link, although you have already reached Level-4 in such a short time, you are still considered a young Magician. Naturally, you still have not spent enough time with the profound wisdom that is magic. If you are willing, you may choose one of the masters to be your mentor. You do not have to make the decision immediately. You should, in fact, talk to all the masters and only make a decision when you find the best match."

The strength of a Magician was never the main concern when a disciple had to choose a mentor. The mentor's personality, teaching pedagogy and the area of their magic research was often the most important matter. It was also important to find a mentor that you could work well with.

Link was elated upon hearing these words. Similarly, the masters in the hall also immediately had a glow in their eyes. Every one of them wanted Link as a disciple.

A Level-4 Magician at a tender age of 17 was a genius that might not even appear once every century. Even Wavier of the South could not compare to this prodigy.

Perhaps this would be the person who would replicate the glorious achievements of Legendary Magician Bryant and attain the pinnacle strength. If they could be known as the mentor of a Legendary Magician—their names would go down in the annals of history!

However, Link had already made the decision, "Can it be anyone?"

"The person might not need to be a master as long as you think that they are the best fit. Of course, the masters are definitely good choices," Anthony explained. He too, would like to take Link as his disciple. However, as the principal of the academy, he needed to take a step back and open up this chance up to the six-man council.

"Moira has been answering my queries regarding magic all this time and is therefore in essence, already my mentor. When she was fighting the Necromancer, she also cast a Level-6 spell, The Edge of Zenith, proving that she has also become a Level-6 Magician. Hence, I will like to become Master Moira's disciple," Link said.

This was a decision Link came to after careful consideration of all the different factors. Herrera would definitely share all her knowledge with him without withholding any information. Furthermore, she was also Anthony's most treasured disciple. If Herrera did not have the answer to a problem Link had, she would naturally approach Anthony. Link would thus benefit from the knowledge of two strong Magicians.

Anthony smiled upon hearing those words. He was a wise man and saw through Link's plan immediately. However, in the presence of all the other masters, he asked, "Will you not reconsider? Master Grenici is very adept at alchemy, while Master Ferdinand is unmatched in the area of fire elemental magic. Master Weissmuller on the other

hand, is a master at creating magic equipment."

Whenever Anthony was introducing the niche area of that specific master, Link would bow respectfully. When Anthony was done with his speech, Link said, "Principal Anthony, my magic foundation is still very weak. I would definitely consult the masters when I think I am ready to reach the next level. When that time comes, please kindly take me in."

Even though Link had made it clear that he did not want to change his decision, he still kept his options open. He knew that the knowledge from the other masters was also extremely valuable and that it would help him reach the pinnacle of magic.

Link had already made his choice and he was clearly unshaken. The masters could only watch and feel slightly jealous of Anthony.

Such impressive oratorical skills, Anthony thought.

Anthony had a good impression of Link ever since he heard how Link handled Darris' ambush. Seeing it with his own eyes truly made him fond of this young man. To think that he could remain so calm and collected in front of the strongest Magicians in the academy and at the same time, maximize his interest while being extremely respectful.

In contrast, the Darris that he once valued was not much of a prodigy after all.

If all goes well, this kid will become one the core members of this academy in a few years' time.

Anthony had seen many disciples come and go. Link reminded him of another young man that he saw a few years back. This young man had silver hair and a lean physique. He was good looking and had the bloodline of the ancient Neanderthalensis (Note: An ancestral race known for their magical talents). His name was Wavier; he was the most brilliant Magician amongst the young generation in the Southern Free Trade Confederation.

"It's time to pass it on to the new generation," Anthony sighed, looking contented.

Link would surely laugh if he knew Anthony thought so highly of Wavier. From his knowledge, Wavier was indeed heralded as a prodigy in this timeline. However, his flawed and aloof personality would eventually cause his demise in the future. There was only one true genius in this game, and in the current timeline, he was still

unknown. That person was the half-elf, Eliard.

"I presume you are tired, please take a rest," Anthony concluded.

Link and Herrera then left the Hall of Truth. Since he was already officially Herrera's disciple, Link went directly to her Mage Tower. Herrera naturally welcomed him and was prepared to give him a spacious and comfortable bedroom on the third floor of her tower.

Herrera's Mage Tower was a lot smaller than Bale's. There were only a total of four floors and the third level was already the core layer. It was also the layer where the largest Elemental Pool in the Mage Tower lay. The fourth floor was where Herrera herself stayed.

However, Link refused and insisted that he stayed on the second floor together with Eliard. When Link told Eliard that he had also become Moira's disciple, Eliard was elated. Now, there was no need for them to meet at the common square every day. He could simply just go to Link's room to exchange magic knowledge.

He was however, surprised at Link's magic powers. Link had already canceled the effects of the Feather of Disguise; Eliard could feel the strong Mana power emanating from him. Eliard was both shocked and relieved. He had always felt it was a waste that Link did not have the magic talent that matched up to his intelligence. Now it seemed perfect.

He was slightly jealous, though. Link showed no signs of complacency and still treated him the same way as he did in the past. Eliard was thus relieved.

Time flew. It had been a week since Link moved into Herrera's Mage Tower.

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Link originally wanted to surrender his Occultic Rune to Herrera. However, he had been so absorbed in his magic research this whole week, especially reading Herrera's huge collection of magic books. In his free time, he would write his thesis and experiment on new spells in the Elemental Pool.

It did not even occur to him to bring up the Occultic Rune.

Herrera did not have many disciples. The only two official Magician disciples she had

were Eliard and Link. After splitting the usage of the Elemental Pool equally, Link had three hours a day to perform his magic experiments. With the Elemental Pool, Link mastered three Supreme Magical Skills in a week. Two of which were ordinary skills, however, the third one was extremely powerful. It concerned the State of Gibraltar.

Ever since he exceeded his limit in the Mist Basin while consecutively releasing multiple Glass Orb spells, he had developed a strong interest in the State of Gibraltar. An idea struck him while he was in the middle of his research and he decided to expand on it.

He had already thought through all the required magic formation and mana flow for the spell. All that was left was to test it out in the Elemental Pool. Link set the room to a "do not disturb" mode and started his experiment.

At this moment, a group of Magicians from the East Cove Higher Magic Academy was preparing to set off for war.

There was a total of 130 Magicians. The youngest was just over 20 years old, while the oldest was 40.

The strongest Level-4 Magician was one of Anthony's disciples named Fischer. He was also the leader of this mission. Around two-thirds of the group was made up of mid-level apprentices. Most of them had limited magic talent and had little to no hope of becoming official Magicians. They were merely trying to gain some merit from the war which would hopefully lead to a better future.

One of them was Marco, an apprentice from Bale's Mage Tower. He boarded the carriage with a dazed expression on his face.

Chapter 119

Link's Machine Gun

Many Magicians had left the academy to join the army, though Link took no notice of this as he was busy in a mid-level Elemental Pool. He was skillfully manipulating the magic seal and was engrossed in his spell experiments.

Just as its name would suggest, the Elemental Pool's appearance resembled that of a pool. There were five of them, each housing the five basic elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth.

Each of the elements was of a distinct color and the colorful pools were placed around the perimeter of the expansive room along with the controlling magic seal. Once the magic seal was triggered by the presence of active Mana, a Level-5 Guarding Barrier would then be instantly activated.

A layer of thin translucent barrier enveloped Link's body. It might seem fragile, but it was indeed powerful enough to protect him from any magic spells that were below Level-5. This meant that even Flame Blast wouldn't be able to do anything to him now.

Link had the power to manipulate the five elements as he wished through the controlling magic seal, into which he then began to pour his Mana into.

By now, a week had passed since the day he was poisoned by the Mana potion and all symptoms had basically disappeared. Thus, Link could now cast any spells without holding back.

The controlling magic seal then guided Link's Mana out of the barrier and into the center of the room. Link was then able to remotely control his Mana and construct any spell structure he wished from it. This time, he'd chosen to experiment with Flame Blast. He'd been using the spell ever since Gladstone's days, yet it was only recently that he truly learned its structure.

He had now received 60 Omni Points for advancing to Level-4, but time had been scarce lately and the spell structure of Flame Blast had been too complicated. So, Link had only been able to master the standard version of the spell.

Because Link wasn't using a wand, the spellcasting was slower than normal. Plus, the spell structure was quite intricate because he had added some of his own modifications to it, so in the end the whole spellcasting process took 3.5 seconds to complete.

Once the spell structure was fully formed, it then attracted the fire element. Under Link's control, it flowed slowly into the spell structure and permeated through it before it began to form a fireball.

This time the experiment was still in its rudimentary stage, so Link's control of the fire element was still very limited. Thus, the explosive power of the resulting Flame Blast was only one-tenth of its full potential.

Once the spellcasting was complete, Link detonated the resulting Flame Blast immediately.

Bang!

A tiny explosion went off and a shockwave spread out through the air. But as Link was protected by the Guarding Barrier, he was completely unaffected by it.

So far, everything went as expected.

But a second later, something strange happened. There was a bizarre Mana fluctuation when the Flame Blast exploded and then, right after the explosion subsided, another Flame Blast emerged.

The new Flame Blast then began to attract fire elements, which immediately filled in the spell structure just as the previous Flame Blast did.

This was a mystery to Link, as he hadn't made any effort to cast a new Flame Blast at all. The only thing he did was keep the flow of his Mana into the magic seal constant.

The newly-emerged Flame Blast then exploded and within a fraction of a second, one more Flame Blast appeared. Link burst into laughter at the sight before him – his experiment was a success!

Then, a notification appeared on the interface.

Player attained a new Supreme Magical Skill. 10 Omni Points rewarded. Please name

the name spell.

"I think I'll call it Machine Gun," said Link.

Naming of new spell successful.

Machine Gun

General Supreme Magical Skill

Scope: Any spell below Level-5.

Effects: Allows the spellcaster to cast one type of spell in close succession. The spellcaster needs only to construct the spell structure once, as it would automatically emerge from the Mana residue of the previous casting.

(Note: Link's Machine Gun is a high-speed spellcasting technique.)

The real state of Gibraltar involved the engraving of the spellcaster's soul onto the magic seal, which was undoubtedly a complex and esoteric operation. Not to mention it was a risky one because there was a good chance that a single mistake might lead to the damage of the soul. In fact, parts of the knowledge associated with this state were purportedly so evil that it could be classified as black magic.

Link's magic skills hadn't yet reached this level, though. His spellcasting techniques were only a shadow of the real thing and were only an application of parts of the theories that described the state of Gibraltar.

With this Supreme Magical Skill, the most time was spent on the first spellcasting as there would be no time wasted on spell structure construction in the subsequent castings. The higher the spell level, the faster it would work and if it was used in conjunction with the Domingo crystal, it was possible to virtually cast spells in an instant.

This is amazing! thought Link, All I need now is a slight upper hand in battles and there would be no way anyone could defeat me!

Link thought of how much time this skill would save him. With the help of the Domingo crystal, he realized that he could unleash Flame Blast in the time it took to blink an eye!

With a high-speed Flame Blast, and several of it in quick successions to boot – Link was thrilled at the thought of possessing such a formidable power!

And if he used it on Glass Orbs, he could virtually unleash an unending string of them without using much of his energy at all – what a power that would be!

This would certainly come in handy on the battlefield. If he was ever faced with a never-ending onslaught of enemies, with the help of a few Warriors around him, he could effectively form a magic fort with this skill!

Once he'd truly mastered it, he was sure he would use it so frequently that it would become second nature to him.

Link then combined the skill of Machine Gun to every spell he'd ever mastered and practiced using it together. After five hours of hard work and with the help of the gaming system, Link was now thoroughly familiar with this Supreme Magical Skill.

He walked out of the Elemental Pool and stretched. He discovered how tired he actually was – he was in no mood to study at the moment. He also had no new ideas to work on for his thesis, so he decided to take a walk to freshen up his mind. But only a few steps later, he thought of the agreement with Herrera.

I should go get a few magic materials from Herrera's warehouse and build new magic gear.

He'd already had some ideas for novel enchantment gear in his mind, plus he now had the 5000 gold coins' reward from the dean, so the time was ripe for new magic gear.

He cast a spell for a magic mirror, then used it to tidy up his hair and clothes. Then, he headed towards the fourth floor of the Mage Tower.

He gently rapped on the door as usual, then patiently waited for a reply.

The door would usually open in less than a minute, but Link had been waiting for two minutes now yet it was all silent and the door was still closed.

That's strange. Is she out? But she never goes out anywhere.

Link was about to turn back and leave when he heard the door click open and a voice coming from inside the room.

"Come in, Link, and wait for me in the sitting room," said the voice, "I'm in the shower."

It seemed that he'd come at an inconvenient time, but since he was already there, Link decided it was best to just wait for Herrera.

Link entered the hall and the door instantly closed behind him. He went to the bookshelf and scanned the titles of the books there. Then, he pulled out one that was called Runic Wheels Stacking and began to read it.

Runic wheels were the basis of all spell levels. Link had developed his spell Whistle based on the exploitation of the runic wheels. The field of runic wheel studies were so profound and full of potential that it was almost a branch in magic studies all on its own.

Link was very interested in these kinds of modular theories in magic and he had spent a lot of time and energy on the subject both in his thesis and in his experiments.

The textbook described the many techniques in exploiting runic wheels. After a few pages, he began to be fascinated by the subject and started to be so engrossed in reading it that he was oblivious to the flow of time.

While he was completely preoccupied with the book, he heard a sound nearby. Link instinctively looked up and saw Herrera walking out into the sitting room, fresh out of the shower.

She was wearing a white silk bathrobe that hugged her figures intimately, accentuating those fabulous curves of hers. Link had seen Herrera's naked body before, but that was at a time of emergency, and it was only a quick glance, so neither of them had thought much of it.

But things were different now. Their two souls had intertwined ever since the incident in Shade's Mage Tower. Herrera had tended to his wounds so tenderly then that it was impossible to look at Herrera the same way again. She now had a special place in Link's heart and there was nothing he could do about it. Link wasn't aware of it, but his gaze was completely locked on Herrera now, and he found himself unable to turn away.

"Tutor," Link said after forcefully pulling his gaze away from Herrera, "I must've come at an inconvenient time. I'll come back later."

As he spoke, Link was getting ready to leave. It really wasn't the right time after all, as his focus had been completely diverted from the thoughts of magic gear. He reckoned he wouldn't get much done anyway even if he stayed.

Herrera was intrigued by Link's reaction. She then cast a drying spell on her damp hair, then sat on a chair and brushed her hair in front of a magic mirror that she had just conjured up.

She felt she had nothing to hide from Link. He was her disciple now and he was also a comrade who had fought with her in battles. Not to mention, he was also the person who had been chosen by the God of Light.

"No, stay," she said, "As the Chosen One, you'll be tested with countless temptations in the future – beauty, knowledge, strength, power and so much more. You must start learning to fight them now."

Link cursed silently to himself. How could Herrera possibly ask him to resist this kind of temptation?

There wouldn't be a problem at all if it had been any other woman, but with Herrera? She was an Angel of Light, one of the Four Great Beauties voted by the players of the game – how could he possibly stand there unaffected with such an enchantress right in front of him?

"Tutor, forgive me for my frankness, but there is a limit to the self-control for us mere mortals. The gods themselves advised against tempting the devil. In the face of a tantalizing temptation, surely the best thing to do is to stay away from it." This was a conclusion he'd reached himself after having pondered about such things a lot lately, induced by the fate that befell the Master Magician Bale.

"Very wise," Herrera nodded in approbation. Then she asked, "But what if you can't run away from it, then? Would you then give in to the temptations?"

Great, now we're actually going to argue about this.

Link sighed as he was reminded of Darris' curse that doomed him to a life of loneliness. Why else would he be having a dry and boring debate with a beauty who just got out of the shower? But as the conversation went on, Link realized that he was feeling more comfortable and at ease.

"If there's no way of escaping the temptation," started Link, closing the book in his hands, "Then one would just have to give in, at least for the time being. Once one was exposed to the same temptations over and over again, the temptation then ceases to be tempting, and over time it would take no effort at all to resist it. In fact, one can become indifferent or annoyed at the enticements that used to hold so much appeal in the past."

As he spoke, he no longer averted his gaze away from Herrera. He was now staring straight at her, pinpointing his gaze on whichever part of her body he desired. It was Herrera herself who had wanted him to stay, after all, so he'd better take the full advantage and drink in the glorious view before him.

But the more Link studied Herrera the more he noticed how much more beautiful she'd gotten lately, possibly because of the awakening of her angelic soul. She was already 35 years old and she had a mature temperament, but her skin seemed more delicate and radiant now and her curves were as alluring as ever. Though she had maintained her seraphic and elegant nature, at this moment she seemed less like a pure angel to Link and more like an enticing devil!

This time, it was Herrera's turn to feel uneasy. She wasn't a hundred percent angel after all – apart from her angelic nature, there was a human nature in her as well. By now her face had turned rose red, as though she was inebriated by wine.

"Interesting. I'll be sure to keep what you said in mind in the future," she said. "So why did you come see me today?" she asked, desperate to change the subject, "Do you need anything?"

The question fell like a bucket of cold water over Link's head. He was suddenly reminded of his original intention in coming to meet Herrera.

"I need some materials to construct some magic gear," he said bluntly, "I'm assuming the promise still stands?"

Herrera took a quick glance at Link. Her expressions briefly betrayed her slight dissatisfaction, though she remained as charming as ever.

"I knew you wouldn't forget about that. Yes, of course. Come on, follow me."

Chapter 120

The Art of Earning Money

Although Herrera claimed to have a treasure trove of magic equipment, the real sight of her magnificent storage was extremely underwhelming. Link was prepared to be blown away by the collection but was, in fact, greeted with a container three feet long and two feet wide. It was small enough to be placed under Herrera's bed.

It was difficult for Link to keep his eyes off Herrera, especially when she was only wearing a thin bathrobe. When Herrera leaned over to pull the container from under her bed, her beautiful curves were accentuated by the bathrobe. Link averted his gaze.

He swore to never land himself in this kind of situation again.

Herrera flipped opened the wooden box cover and layers of wooden boards filled with small wooden boxes unfolded itself right in front of his eyes. There were a total of ten layers and at least 100 wooden boxes in this small container. Every wooden box was filled to the brim with little things. The small ones were no larger than a green bean, while the larger items were at least the size of half a fist. There were precious metals and wood, which were basic ingredients for the creation of magic equipment. Link could name some of the materials he saw, but was clueless to the others.

Even if one simply looked at the variety of items present in this chest alone, it was already a large collection. However, the number of items was also amazing.

"The chest is a dimensional equipment enchanted with shrinking magic. For example, this thorium is only the size of a green bean, but in fact..." Herrera took the thorium out of the small wooden box and it immediately increased to the size of a thumb.

Herrera was not lying. Her treasure trove lived up to its name.

"Take your pick and tell me what you chose. I will say in advance, the half-price offer is only limited to five items, any more and they will be charged at their original prices." Herrera stepped aside and gave Link some space.

Link was already spoiled for choice. He saw rare metals like thorium, premium silver

and Khorium as well as precious wood like rosewood, Aoki wood and Perilla wood. There were also many mysterious meteorites and crystals of different attributes. It was like a physical encyclopedia of magic.

After browsing for a full half an hour, Link finally decided on the materials he wanted to buy.

Herrera calculated and said, "The original price is 20000 gold coins, after the discount it will be 10000 gold coins."

Link had a pained expression on his face. After all, he only picked five items, he couldn't believe his ears.

"This Perilla wood is of the highest quality, made from the core of a Perilla tree that was struck down by a bolt of lightning. Look at its color, its purple metallic glow was perfectly preserved. The lowest market price for such a high-quality piece of wood is 4000 gold coins. This Khorium is also arguably the best anti-magic metal and a good stabilizing agent. Even though it is only 1 ounce in weight, the market price for this is at least 6000 gold coins. This as well...in essence, this is really the cheapest price you will ever find."

Link was at a loss for words. At that moment, he fully understood how expensive magic research could be. Not only did he lose the 5000 gold coins he just received as a reward, he was even 5000 gold coins more in debt!

"If I sell you my current wand, how much can it fetch?" Link took out his matchstick wand and showed Herrera. He was starting to find his wand outdated and was planning to craft a new one anyway. Since he already bought so many high-quality materials, he should make good use of them.

"This wand is pretty well crafted. The only drawback is the low-quality materials used to craft it. If you are willing to sell, I can give you 3800 gold coins." Herrera gave a reasonable price.

Even though the material was of low-quality and the attributes were slightly lacking in luster for an Epic quality wand, the skills required to craft this wand was well worth the 3800 gold coins.

Link, on the other hand, was shocked, "That much?"

He was estimating the price to be around 2500 gold coins. The materials from this wand came from his New Moon Wand and Fire Crystal Staff. Judging from the materials alone, it would be a bargain even if he managed to sell it at 1300 gold coins. 3800 gold coins was simply daylight robbery!

"Of course, how do you think I managed to collect so many high-quality materials? I earned most of my money from crafting magic equipment and making good use of the leftovers from the crafting process. While the materials are expensive, they would be useless without a Magician skilled enough to craft equipment out of them. This is why our skill is the most valuable."

Herrera pointed to Link's wand and said, "If you are willing to spend some time and alter the attributes of your wand, for example changing Might of a Giant to an offensive or defensive magic, this wand will be able to fetch a much higher price. It can probably be sold for 5000 gold coins, or even 6000 gold coins if you have enough fame. People will usually barter and pay using precious raw materials instead of gold coins due to the insane prices of magic equipment in general."

Link was dumbfounded. Originally, he thought his debt of 5000 gold coins would be extremely difficult to pay off. However, after Herrera's speech, he realized that he was in fact a money-making machine.

He simply needed to concentrate and craft a wand to pay off a debt that amounted to more than what an ordinary human would earn in his lifetime. It was simply amazing!

Link felt that he had come a long way as he looked back on his experiences writing magic scrolls in Bale's Mage Tower.

A successful Magician needed to have a strong magic staff, powerful magic equipment enchanted with defensive or healing spells and also an impressive library of magic books. Most importantly, they needed to have their own Mage Tower!

All of these items required a huge amount of gold coins, tens of thousands of them. A Mage Tower complete with all its functions would, by itself, cost more than 100000 gold coins to build. For example, Herrera spent an estimated 160000 gold coins to construct her mid-level Mage Tower. Furthermore, the Mage Tower still belonged to the academy, Herrera only had its usage rights. She was hence not allowed to alter the Mage Tower to her desires.

Link had always been concentrating on learning magic and ignored planning for his future. As he continued to grow stronger, he would need some plans moving ahead.

I want a Mage Tower that belongs entirely to me! Link thought.

Link was extremely confident in his enchanting skills. After listening to Herrera's words, he immediately took back his matchstick and said, "I will change the attributes accordingly."

"Sure. In a month's time, there will be a grand Magician's market festival held in Hot Springs City. A large number of Magicians from both the Nordic Kingdom and the South will be attending. If you can make the alterations before then, you can fetch a good price with it," Herrera suggested.

The news of an upcoming Magician's market was music to Link's ears. Having just bought a bunch of precious materials, it was the perfect opportunity for him to earn enough money to pay off his debts. There was no time for him to idle around; his eyes brightened as he said, "I will prepare immediately!"

Link left Herrera's room and rushed to the enchanting room on the third floor of the Mage Tower. Originally, only Herrera had access to the enchanting room. However, as Link was her trusted ally, she naturally also gave him the right to use the room to hone his enchanting skills.

Link immediately plunged himself into work the moment he thought of his 5000 gold coins' debt.

He only had one month. He planned to use his available low-quality materials to refine his matchstick wand. He would then use the rare materials he bought from Herrera to make a new wand for himself. He was even thinking of infusing the Domingo Crystal into the wand as well, together with the Perilla wood, thorium and Khorium. He would use up all his high-quality materials in the creation of this new wand.

If there were still materials left after that, he could craft some defensive magic equipment or even some aesthetically pleasing accessories that could fetch a high price at the Magician's market.

As Link was concentrating on crafting his magic equipment, Herrera received a letter from River Cove Town. The letter was from Lucy. Link had once requested that Herrera read his letters on behalf of him while he was busy with his magic experiments. If it

was nothing of importance, she would usually reply to them on his behalf as well and would only interrupt him if she required his input.

Herrera opened the letter.

The letter briefly gave an update on the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries and was attached with 1000 gold coins which claimed to be the profits from their endeavors. The letter ended off mentioning the situation at the Cliff of Howling Winds. Jacker seemed to have found traces of magic in the area and he suspected it to be the work of Dark Elf Felidia. If this could be verified, then the Dark Elves could very likely have been there.

Herrera carefully read the letter and frowned.

"Cliff of Howling Winds? How did Link get involved with the Dark Elves?"

Herrera approached Link at night during his break and handed the letter over to him, asking, "Who is Felidia?"

Link was still thinking about the construction of his new wand and simply replied without thinking much, "An enemy—he is one of the main people behind the Syndicate...so Jacker found the Cliff of Howling Winds?"

Link finally reacted to the question and immediately read the letter. He pondered for a moment before speaking in a serious tone, "Herrera, I have something I need to tell you."

"Yes?"

Link took a deep breath and took out Tarviss' Occultic Rune from his dimensional pendant. The moment the rune appeared, the brightness of the room dimmed and the temperature dropped by at least five degrees. It was as though darkness itself descended into the room.

He had already decided not to research into this demonic item. He was simply too busy with his research and completely forgot it. Now was a good chance to come clean. Although he was giving up on his research into the Occultic Rune, he would not let it fall into the hands of the dark forces as well. He felt that it would be wise to hand it over to the academy which was far more powerful than he was.

Herrera was shocked. "What is this? Why do you have such a wicked demonic item? Are you studying black magic?"

"I once planned to study it, but I have since given up on that idea. Will you hear me out?" Link's eyes were clear and his expression calm. He placed the Occultic Rune gently on the enchanting table.

Herrera was relieved to hear that. She had once verified with her own eyes the absence of darkness in his soul during the Mist Basin battle. She sat down and nodded, "I am listening."

Chapter 121

Anthony's Notebook

In Herrera's room.

...

Link started his story from his arrival in River Cove Town, to his cooperation with the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries because he was desperate for money and finally to when they defeated the Dark Brotherhood and killed Viktor—which was where he got the Occultic Rune from. Link explained all that transpired in detail to Herrera without leaving anything out.

"It is almost indestructible," said Link, pointing to the Occultic Rune. "It is a sacred gear of the demons which undoubtedly contains a wealth of knowledge about black magic. My initial plan was to secretly study it, hoping to obtain power from it. But recent events have told me that I was too naive to believe that I could attempt that."

"I wouldn't blame you," said Herrera, shaking her head. She was full of relief. "Curiosity is a quality that any Magician worth their salt would have. In fact, it is the thing that drives a Magician forward. You were able to control your curiosity instead of letting it control you, and that is commendable!"

She then circled the Occultic Rune and her eyebrows creased more tightly.

"It has an ominous aura," said Herrera, "This is a serious matter, I must report it to the dean. Link, you should come with me."

"Of course," Link nodded.

Herrera then put the Occultic Rune inside a magic-sealing box then brought it with her as she and Link headed towards the Heaven's Thorn where Anthony resided.

They reached without any incident, and they found the Level-7 Magician in the alchemy laboratory of the Mage Tower, meticulously cleaning a potion pot.

"What's the matter, Moira?" Anthony was obviously glad to see his favorite disciple as the severe lines on his august face softened when he noticed her.

There was no one else in the alchemy laboratory, so Herrera closed the door behind her. She then took out the wooden box, opened it, and put it on the alchemy counter.

The moment Anthony had a glimpse of the sinister object he stood rooted to the spot with his mouth agape.

He then slowly put down the crystal potion bottle in his hands, walked a few steps towards the alchemy counter, picked up the wooden box, and carefully examined the demonic object.

Judging from his expression, he was shocked at first, then pensive, and then slowly he became more and more fascinated as he seemed to be sucked in by the Occultic Rune. After a long while he jolted himself back to reality and pulled his attention away from it.

Anthony then closed the box tightly and heaved a long sigh. For some reason he seemed to have aged quite a lot since Link last saw him. It was as if the act of closing the box had exhausted all of his strength.

After a while, Anthony put the wooden box back on the alchemy counter, though he seemed to be doing so reluctantly.

It was only a while after that that he spoke up.

"This object is the wellspring of knowledge in black magic. It is very evil and yet at the same time very enticing. Moira, you should put it away quickly."

Herrera had been worried as she observed her tutor's reaction to the Occultic Rune. She stepped forward quickly to retrieve the wooden box and stored it in her storage bracelet.

"Tutor, are you alright?" asked Herrera with genuine concern.

"I'm fine now," answered Anthony as he took a deep breath in relief, "Where did it come from?"

Herrera glanced at Link and he nodded to her. Then she related the events that had

brought about Link's discovery of the Occultic Runes to the dean without leaving anything out. Anthony listened attentively and waited for Herrera to finish. He turned around and stared at Link in suspicion.

"Why did you decide to hand it over?" asked Anthony. "You could've kept it to yourself and studied it in secret—no one would find out."

As he was speaking, the dean scrutinized Link from head to toe. He was both wary and suspicious of this young man – wary because Link had kept the existence of the Occultic Rune hidden from them for quite a while, and suspicious because of his choice to reveal it and give it up now.

The Occultic Rune contained enough secret knowledge in it to make even a Level-7 Magician like Anthony lose his mind. If Anthony had been in the same situation as Link, he would have probably kept it to himself and hid it well, all while continuing to secretly study it. In the brief moment that he came into contact with the object, he experienced first-hand the strong temptations that it drew out, and this made Link's decision even more perplexing to Anthony.

Link's recent achievements had caught his attention, so he had been observing this young man lately. From what he saw, this man's obsession towards magic was in fact even stronger than his, so the charm of the Occultic Rune should have had more effects on Link than it did on him.

"Is that so?" said Anthony, unconvinced. Even so, he couldn't detect a trace of dishonesty in Link's expression.

"I remember the saying, 'Do not stare into the abyss, because the abyss will stare back at you. Do not meddle with the darkness, lest the darkness will pollute your soul'. Sir, I am but a mortal; I don't think I have enough willpower to withstand the abyss' gaze. To be perfectly honest with you, I'm, in fact, still very much interested in this enigmatic object, but...but I am afraid."

He was afraid! Those three words alone contained in them a vast amount of wisdom and humility.

The Occultic Rune was like a glorious mountain of gold with a bottomless abyss at its foot. Most people chose only to focus on the gleaming mountain and ignore the darkness of the abyss, and eventually none of them could escape the fate of getting

sucked into the darkness, paying for the promise of glory with their own lives.

After hearing Link's words, Anthony kept silent for a long time. He looked directly into Link's eyes and saw a pair of dark pupils, deep and clear, radiating with both childlike innocence and bright wisdom.

Herrera did not speak either. She was still impressed by Link's words and she found that she had underestimated the young man. He was not without his own flaws, of course, but he had always been trying to use his wisdom to continuously improve himself.

After all, the gods never chose anyone based only on their physical strength and power – and Link was the perfect embodiment of the fact.

For a time, the alchemy laboratory was as silent as the grave. Finally, it was Anthony who broke the silence with his hearty laugh.

"Yes, what a great way to put it – 'I am afraid!' It's true, I'm afraid, too. In fact, I wouldn't be able to resist the temptation of that evil thing. If I was to be left alone with it, there would be no stopping me from trying to glean as much secret knowledge as I could. I think the best thing to do would be for all of us to face the Occultic Rune together."

"Moirá," said Anthony, "You've always been shrouded by the blessed aura of the God of Light. Though you've never mentioned it before, your true identity has always been clear to me. Thus I am sure that among the three of us, you're the only one who can completely resist the evil force of this object, so you should be the one to guard it!"

"Yes, tutor," nodded Herrera.

"But don't let your guard down just yet," Anthony continued, "Even the sun does set beneath the horizon, even the day gives way to the night. There is no saying that the glory of light will be unchallenged forever. Anything can happen in the future. Link and I will be keeping an eye on you, and both of you must keep an eye on me as well. No matter what reason I give you, you must never let me touch this evil thing ever again! And neither should you have any more business with it, Link!"

Anthony's tone was fierce and impassioned as he spoke. He was evidently fearful of the evil powers of the Occultic Rune.

Mortals tended to be at their most vulnerable when they were left alone after all!

A man alone, without any guidance or supervision, was capable of doing anything. This was the reason why Anthony wouldn't trust himself to guard the Occultic Rune alone and instead chose to have all three of them mutually preventing the other two from ever touching the evil crystal again. He was confident that this was the most secure method to prevent anyone from misusing the powers that the Occultic Rune contained.

Link still had one last cause of qualm, though.

"But sir, may I ask why you would trust me to guard it too? Wouldn't the academy's high council be more suitable as the guardians of such a portentous object?"

Although Link was now officially a Level-4 Magician and could hold his own in the battlefields, Link was aware of how much he fell short in the actual understanding of the theories in magic compared to the Master Magicians. He doubted if he could be trusted to guard the Occultic Rune together with Herrera and the dean.

"Don't belittle yourself, young man," said Anthony with a smile, "It would be a terrible idea to let more people know of the object's existence. And those graybeards in the council might even try to get you expelled from the academy."

Anthony raised his hand and interrupted Herrera as she was about to protest.

"I know, it may sound outrageous, but it is the truth. The masters of the high council are old and obdurate. The only things they care about are the rules."

As he finished his sentence, Anthony then took out his wand.

It was an imposing looking wand called the Dean's Decree. It was a sacred gear that was passed down from one dean to the next. It was similar to a king's scepter in appearance, except even more elegant and delicate. Legends had it that the wand was made of the branch of the World Tree from the Elf kingdom. The gemstone on its tip, on the other hand, was called the Rainbow Moonstone and it was a precious gem found in the heart of Mount Chalfield – the highest mountain in the Rocky mountain range. All the world's most gorgeous gemstones would be eclipsed by the Rainbow Moonstone's brilliant gleam if they were presented next to each other.

As Link gazed at the wand a notification appeared on the interface.

The Dean's Decree, the Guardian's Wand.

Quality: Legendary

First Effect: The wand holder's spellcasting speed will be increased by 100%.

Second Effect: The power of the wand holder's spells will be boosted by 150%.

Third Effect: The Mana recovery speed of the wand holder will be increased by 200%.

Fourth Effect: Because of the magical properties of the World Tree, the wand holder is able to use a Legendary spell that would resurrect a corpse that has been dead for no longer than a day. This spell is only limited to once a year.

(Note: This is the Legendary Magician Bryant's magic staff, formerly known as Fiona's Hug.)

Link was filled with wonder as he read through its description on the interface.

Tsk tsk, that is quite a list of effects for a single wand!

Anthony then pointed the wand to an empty space beside him, where a black hole then emerged out of thin air. He reached his hand into the void and took out a beautifully decorated notebook.

"Young man, this is my gift to you." He then handed Link a notebook.

"But tutor," exclaimed Herrera, "This is your lifetime's worth of effort!"

Anthony laughed.

"Yes, of course. It's precisely because of that why I must carefully select a successor who will receive this notebook of mine. Moira, please don't tell any of your brothers, or they might get green-eyed with envy."

He then turned around and focused his gaze on Link.

"In this notebook I've recorded everything that I have learned ever since becoming a Magician. I had planned to leave it to Moira after my death, but I'm giving it to you now. And once you're done studying it, you can pass it to Moira then," explained Anthony.

Link's heart almost burst with happiness knowing that Level-7 Master Magician's

lifetime's worth of knowledge was going to be handed down to him. The value of this notebook far exceeded that of the Occultic Rune. It seemed he had made the right choice in revealing the truth to Herrera!

He then took the notebook from Anthony very carefully with both of his hands as though it was as fragile as glass.

"I will not let you down, Sir," he said solemnly.

"I have faith in you," said Anthony, nodding. He then suddenly tapped his forehead with his wand, as if considering something.

"Oh, by the way, young man," he said, "I've heard that you are a nobleman's son. Would you be interested in joining the army as a knight?"

"Me, in the army?" Link couldn't quite follow the dean's train of thoughts.

"Yes, you, in the army. The kingdom's army has now advanced far to the North, but I fear they still lack an experienced Battle Mage. If you are interested, I can recommend you to the army and you may join as a deputy commander. You don't have to give me an answer now. There's still time before the army reaches the northern border, and even then, there'll still be many preparations to make. You have two months to think about it."

Link fell silent. He took the matter seriously and took his time considering it.

"Since there is still so much time left," said Link finally, "Then I'd better sharpen up my magic skills now and learn as much as I can before the time comes."

"Go on, young man," said Anthony. Herrera was slightly taken aback by the kindly smile that lit up the dean's face. In all these years as his disciple, she had never seen such a joyful expression on Anthony's face before.

Afterwards, when Link and Herrera were on their way back from the Heaven's Thorn, Link seemed to be deep in thought.

"I still think that something must be done about Felidia soon. The Dark Elf could be working on an evil plot right as we speak. I must take a visit to River Cove Town."

"You've got a point," said Herrera, "Go ahead, then. Be careful on your way, and don't

take any brash actions if anything unexpected occurs. Use this to contact me." She then handed him something that was shining brightly.

After examining it closely Link discovered that it was a white feather. He wasn't so surprised because Celine had once given him a similar feather as well. He took the feather then carefully kept it inside his storage pendant.

"Understood," Link nodded.

He did not return to the Mage Tower after that but went directly to the academy stables instead.

Chapter 122

Operating a Mercenary Band

River Cove Town was made extremely lively by a soldier recruitment exercise held by the town hall. Many aspiring soldiers in the areas surrounding the Girvent Forest who were eager to attain military achievements had made their way to town. There were even experienced mercenaries who were tired of the vagabond life, and were seeking to work for a more structured and stable organization.

The crowd had also attracted some groups of merchants, and peculiar gadgets and accessories could be seen being sold on the streets. The people of Firuman loved to shop as well, and all these intriguing items had attracted many tourists to River Cove Town for a few days of fun. As a result, the town became even more crowded, which then attracted the circus, which deemed it as a highly profitable spot to hold performances.

This was the scene that Link was greeted with when he returned to River Cove Town. The two sides of the road were filled with stalls selling a variety of items, ranging from fresh fruits and vegetables to toys and even lucky charms. The previously empty spot just outside of town now had a large carriage, where many exotic animals were performing stunts and attracting many onlookers.

Looking at this scene through the window of his carriage, Link exclaimed, "What a rare sight."

The town was really small and the crowd made it even more difficult for the carriage to maneuver itself through the narrow streets. It took Link 20 minutes to get from the town entrance to the house of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries.

Compared to before, the house had expanded and had become livelier. Cheers could be heard from the training fields located directly beside the house. It seemed like the members were in the midst of training.

However, Link found a few things peculiar. He realized that the house was still protected merely by a wooden fence and the door was still an ordinary wooden door. Even the damages on the door had not been fixed.

While the number of members had increased, their equipment seemed old and their clothes tattered. Except for the Flamingo necklace that hung around their necks, they looked no different from ordinary mercenaries. Link even saw a few members squatting in the corner of the yard to consume their meals, which only consisted of bread and a bowl of soup. The conditions seemed rough.

Link frowned. "Didn't Lucy say that the mercenary band was making a profit? She even sent 1000 gold coins over to the academy. This does not resemble anything that she told me."

The mercenary band should be earning at least 1500 gold coins to be able to send over 1000 gold coins to the academy. This was a huge amount of money for an ordinary person. It was not possible to earn this amount of money simply accomplishing ordinary tasks. The only possible explanation was a successful raid of a large bandit's hideout.

But as Link looked around the courtyard, there was not a single injured mercenary in sight. This meant that there were no recent battles that mobilized a large group of mercenaries.

Even if the money did come from other sources, some of it should have been used to upgrade their equipment and to repair the yard. It would not even cost much.

Link had come to a conclusion, "Lucy was lying. The 1000 gold coins came from the savings of the mercenary band and were not earned."

Link could figure out the reason for this as well. Lucy probably heard that magic research required a large amount of money and was worried that he would not have enough.

"So this is a loyal follower?"

Although he was used to NPCs being unusually loyal in the game, he was still extremely touched to experience this in real life.

Everyone only thinks about themselves on Earth. It is impossible for a person to be wholeheartedly loyal. They'll be considered a nice person as long as they are mature enough to keep their negative opinions to themselves. However, the World of Firuman values the bonds between people and places great emphasis on status. If a follower swears their loyalty to you, they will never betray you. Link thought about this and

sighed.

This sight once again reminded Link that he was no longer on Earth, but in an otherworldly dimension where words and allegiance were, at times, valued over someone's life.

The crest of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy on the carriage was way too prominent. The moment Link stepped onto the lawn, Jacker came out to welcome him.

In comparison, Jacker had definitely become more well-built over the past few weeks and even developed a stern demeanor. His Battle Aura had also become more pronounced, looking more like a true master. However, this stern demeanor was not meant to exert dominance over Link. Jacker smiled the moment he saw Link and bowed respectfully. "My lord, you have returned.

Link smiled and nodded before taking the stairs up to the hall on the second floor. The first thing Link did was place 1500 gold coins on the table. This included the 1000 gold coins Lucy sent him and the other 500 gold coins were from his own savings. Upon seeing Jacker's puzzled expression, Link laughed.

"The mercenary band had indeed grown in size. However, River Cove Town is a small place; it is not possible to earn 1000 gold coins in a week. I presume this was taken from the pool of money we earned previously?" Link smiled and stared at Jacker.

Jacker did not expect Link to return so soon, and even see through their lies so easily. He scratched his head, looking slightly embarrassed. "My lord, we were thinking that you might be able to put this to better use than us..."

Link shook his head, "I'm not short of money. In fact, look at yourself. You are still wearing your old undershirt and belt. It's time to change them."

Jacker still firmly believed that Link was actually in need of money. He immediately waved his hands and said, "It's more comfortable to wear these old clothes. It's fine, I promise."

Link then pushed the bag of coins towards Jacker and spoke in a serious tone, "Listen to me!"

Jacker immediately sat up and listened intently.

"The development of the mercenary band is not possible without wealth. The battle equipment, training facilities, compensation for death and injuries, maintenance and expansion of the area, as well as rewards and remunerations...these are all inevitable expenses. If you are to save on these important aspects, what incentives do the members have to continue staying in your mercenary band? They will find it increasingly tough to stay and will rather leave to work on their own as the benefits are simply insufficient. This will be extremely unfavorable to the future development of the mercenary band," Link advised.

This was the truth and Jacker fully understood what Link was trying to say.

"We may be lacking in equipment, but we are very generous with the commission. The mercenary band only takes 10 percent of their total reward—this is extremely low in the current market," he explained.

Link stopped Jacker right there. "These are only the most basic benefits and can, at most, ensure the daily operations of the mercenary band. In order to bring the development to another level, the mercenary band has to work on their branding and prestige!"

"Branding...prestige?" Jacker was confused, how do you operate on these intangible things?

Link nodded and asked, "What do you think of when I mention the term nobility?"

Jacker was following Link's train of thought closely. He pictured the nobles he had seen in his mind and described them.

"They dress elegantly and lived in huge castles. They travel in their magnificent carriages and have endless wealth and countless fields under their names. They are also proud and haughty, speaking to commoners as though we are second-class citizens."

"And do you aspire to become a noble?" Link asked.

"A little..." Jacker was slightly embarrassed. It was in fact his dream to one day become a noble. This was simply human nature. If given an opportunity, even the lofty intellectuals who appeared to despise nobility and even wrote papers criticizing them would probably jump on it the first chance they get.

"This is why our mercenary band still has a lot of things to work on. We have to fix the yard and beautify our base. Our members have to wear superior equipment that is also aesthetically pleasing. Rules will also have to be set in place to restrict their behavior in public. We have to cultivate a brand name that is powerful, reliable and safe. This is what I meant by operating on our prestige," Link explained.

"This might need a lot of money to accomplish." Jacker was slightly hesitant. However, he was also tempted. The mercenary band that Link mentioned was exactly the same as what he envisioned the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries could become one day. This had always been his dream.

"Then you must keep this money. Since you have already started chasing your dream, do not give up! Give it your all!"

Jacker fell silent for a while before speaking, "My lord, you have always been helping us. What can we do to repay you?"

Link smiled and said, "You guys have been a great help up until now. When the mercenary band becomes even stronger, I still have many tasks for you. Now, keep the money."

His original intent was to use the mercenary band to generate revenue for his magic exploits. However, ever since he realized the economic potential of his enchanting skills, he dismissed this thought.

Link's continued support of the mercenary band was mostly due to the bonds he forged with his comrades, but was also partly due to the fact that he could recruit some helpers that would help him in his grand quest.

The World of Firuman was complex and although magic was powerful, it was nowhere near omnipotent. There were many things that Link could not do due to his Magician identity, which limited his outreach and capabilities.

For example, a Magician would be unsuitable for missions that involved the mining of information. A Magician's identity was too eye-catching for such missions and they would fail miserably at them. However, it would be the perfect job for a mercenary that was practically unknown.

Jacker carefully took the bag of gold coins and took out a scroll. "My lord, there is a stone hut at the Cliff of Howling Winds. It is well furnished with a complete stock of

daily necessities. However, there is a layer of dust on the furniture. I presume that it had been empty for at least 10 days when I found it. I searched the room and found this scroll in the corner of the room together with the miscellaneous items."

The scroll was black and was made of black alligator skin. There were exquisite silver markings on the edges. Link stared closely at the scroll and gasped, a coded message scroll?

Chapter 123

A Challenge from the Drifting Magician (1)

Cypher Scrolls – these were the common means of communication used by the Dark Elves. They often appeared in the game in Link's previous life, but these were just worthless gray items because the messages on the scrolls were undecipherable, rendering them useless.

Link inspected the Cypher Scroll in detail. What he could deduce from it was the fact that it contained about a thousand words written in Dark Elven letters, although their meaning remained impenetrable to him.

With the help of the gaming system, Link could understand the meaning of each individual word, but a string of words was still incomprehensible. For example, there was a sentence that went the banana peel is bigger than the banana fruit. Link was at a loss as to what these words could actually mean.

This looks like a command letter, Link thought, too bad I don't have the key to unlock this code!

Link then tried to decipher the scroll word by word. But after more than 10 minutes of fruitless efforts, he finally gave up.

Forget it. Maybe I'll have better luck next time, thought Link in frustration. He then put the scroll in his storage pendant.

"We'll stop our investigations into the Cliff of Howling Winds here," said Link, "But you must still pay close attention to any movements in Girvent Forest. If there's any sign of the Dark Elves or if you notice anything out of the ordinary at all, inform Lucy immediately and she'll write to me."

Felidia was a cunning elf. He must've been jolted into action by the mercenaries that Link had hired to investigate him earlier. It wasn't hard for a clever fox like him to come to a conclusion that his identity had been revealed by the raiding of the Syndicate's lair—that must've caused him to hastily retreat.

Link wasn't too worried about the fact that he escaped, though. What he must prevent from ever happening was Felidia's freeing of the demon Tarviss in Girvent forest.

As soon as Link came to that conclusion, a message popped up on the interface regarding the mission to investigate the Cliff of Howling Winds. The dialog box turned red, indicating a failed mission, which meant that the rewards were gone too.

Link could do nothing but concede. He saw no point in beating himself up over it. If he devoted all his time and effort to pursue the rewards from the gaming system, there would be no time to focus on his own progress. Besides, he had no intention of becoming a mere puppet of the gaming system.

Moreover, he was in no shortage of Omni Points. He'd obtained 50 Omni Points from capturing Bale, 20 Omni Points from creating three Supreme Magical Skills, and 60 Omni Points for having truly mastered Flame Blast and becoming a Level-4 Magician – all totaling to 130 Omni Points, which was already an ample amount for him at present.

Jacker noted Link's orders and was ready to obey them unquestioningly. Then, one of the mercenaries came over and was waiting to report something to Jacker.

"Go ahead," said Link, "I won't disturb you anymore. Oh, by the way, tell Rylai to come see me, won't you?" Since he was here now, naturally he'd want to check on his disciple's progress.

"Yes, my lord," answered Jacker.

He had expanded the Flamingo Mercenary Troop and strengthened them so that they would become his powerful ally. But a truly powerful mercenary troop shouldn't just have strong Warriors, it needed a Magician as well. Magicians tended to be proud, though, and most of them would not deign to serve alongside a troop of mercenaries, so Link decided to train one himself.

And that was why he had to pay special attention to Rylai.

Jacker had now left the hall. A while later, Rylai came in. Her overall countenance seemed to have improved since last week. Her cheeks had grown fuller and the water element aura around her body had become more pronounced now—it seemed as if she was glowing. Her eyes were especially bright, but at the same time they still projected her shyness and timidity as well, so anyone looking at her couldn't help but

adore her.

But this was only her outward appearance. The moment Rylai appeared, Link could sense that her Mana was much stronger than when he last met her. Only a week earlier, her Mana had only just been awakened. In fact, he had to touch her to perceive its existence then. But now, her progress was so obvious that he only needed to be in the same room with her to perceive it.

"Very good." Link nodded, visibly pleased.

"Tutor," said Rylai meekly, though she was elated by the sign of her tutor's approval, "I've also managed to learn a spell."

"Oh, what spell is it?" asked Link, pleasantly surprised.

"It's Dewdrops," she answered.

Dewdrops

Level-0 Spell

Effect: Condense the water elements in the air into beads of dew.

"Show me, then," urged Link. Although it was just a Level-0 spell, Link was still impressed that the girl could master it in seven days without any guidance or supervision. This was undeniable proof of her talents and potential.

Rylai nodded then pointed her wand at the surface of the table. She took about three seconds to focus her mind before the tip of her wand lit up, shining a ray of light onto the table's surface. A second later, the light disappeared, and dewdrops covered a palm-sized area on the table.

It was indeed the Dewdrops spell.

"Excellent job," said Link. He realized he'd found a bona fide talent in Rylai and it would be a huge waste of her gifts if she were to stay in here with the mercenaries.

It's time for her to enter the academy. Link thought there was no use in dilly-dallying, so he jumped straight into action.

"Go pack up your things. You'll go with me to the East Cove Magic Academy tomorrow morning."

"My lord?" cried the girl in surprise and disbelief.

It was exactly what she had anticipated hearing ever since Link arrived. She had been restless for fear that Link might not be satisfied with her progress. Heaven knew how desperately she had been working on her magic skills in the last week. She knew that this was the only way she could be useful to anyone. And now that Link had agreed to bring her with him to the academy, she knew that her efforts had all paid off.

Oh God of Light, I am going to the East Cove Magic Academy! That's one of the most sacred sites for Magicians!

Although the girl managed not to jump up in joy, her eyes betrayed her excitement with their extraordinary brilliance. Link couldn't help but smile at the sight of the girl's apparent delight.

"You heard me," said Link as he nodded in confirmation. "Now go on and get ready."

"Yes, tutor." The little girl then sprung out of the hall like a deer.

Lucy came back later in the evening. Now only Gildern was still held up by some business outside.

Lucy was naturally delighted to see Link. After the customary greetings, she rushed to the kitchen and prepared a special meal for him herself. She then laid the silverware that were reserved for when Link came back out on the dining table.

But when they all gathered at the dining table, everyone was cheery and relaxed except Lucy. She was the only one who knew that Link had returned all the gold coins he was given and had even added 500 more gold coins to it. She was worried that Link had sacrificed too much for the sake of the mercenary troop and wished he would take the gold coins back with him.

Link was enjoying the sumptuous meal and the company, but when he saw how distressed Lucy seemed, he took out a small lump of Mithril and put it on the table. In front of everyone, he used his skills of enchantment to transform the Mithril into an elegant bracelet in ten minutes. He even fixed Guarding Barrier on it so the wearer could activate the spell three times with the bracelet.

"Here's a gift to you, Lucy," said Link with a smile as he thrust the bracelet towards her. "Will you stop worrying now?"

Link's show of magic skills had left everyone there awestruck. The bracelet could fetch 700 gold coins based on its function alone without taking into account its delicate handiwork and elegance. It wouldn't be surprising at all if someone would buy it at a price of 1000 gold coins!

Rylai who had been witnessing the whole creation process of the bracelet was simply fascinated. She had learned some basic magic skills, so she knew how hard it was to produce such a magnificent object. At that point she truly appreciated how unbelievably powerful her young tutor really was.

"My lord," said Jacker jovially, "It seems you've gotten much more powerful now!"

"Still, you mustn't forget to take good care of yourself, my lord," said Lucy in a stern voice after putting the bracelet away carefully. "I think your health is a little worse than it was the last time you came back."

"I will," said Link with a forced smile, surprised at how perceptive Lucy was for being able to see the remaining effects of Mana potion poisoning in his body.

After that, they all wine and dined merrily and all the core members of the mercenary troop were enjoying each other's company. Then, just as they were about to turn in, a troop member rushed into the hall. He knew that Link was the true leader, so he addressed him directly.

"My lord, there's a Magician outside waiting to meet you. He said he was from the South and that he'd come to...to see if you're as good as you're rumored to be."

Jacker's face darkened as soon as he heard this.

"What audacity!" he bellowed out as he rose abruptly from his seat. "I must go out and teach him a lesson!"

"I want to see how good you really are" was a common line used to challenge someone to a duel. It was a trick typically adopted by people who wished to make a name for themselves, because the challenger had nothing to lose by challenging an opponent who was renowned to be powerful. If he lost, then it would only be a testament to the opponent's formidable strength, not his own weakness. If he got lucky and won, then

not only would he win the bragging rights, but it would also give him the chance of a lifetime to gain fame and fortune.

This Magician had come to challenge Link's ability himself, possibly because Link's reputation had spread widely. He saw a chance to ride on Link's coattails and move up in the world.

"Calm down," said Link to Jacker as he rubbed his hands together. He then turned to the others and said, "Let him in, and invite him to dine with us. We'll talk about magic skills later after the meal."

Chapter 124

A Challenge from the Drifting Magician (2)

The news of an anonymous challenger created a heavy atmosphere around the dining table.

Jacker's face sunk. He was suppressing his urge to rush out of the dining room to meet this brazen Magician. The Magician was clearly trying to make use of Link for his personal fame. He would not allow that!

Lucy had also put down the knife in her hand and whispered for the servant to bring her the Gale sword. She gently caressed the magic bracelet that Link just gave her

A Magician you say? I wonder which is faster, my sword or your spells?

Rylai, on the other hand, held her breath in fear. She subconsciously tucked her legs closer to her body and leaned towards Link, her eyes darting around the dining room. Occasionally, she would steal a glance at the delicious spread on the table, trying hard to curb her desire to gobble them up.

Sensing that the atmosphere in the room was getting tense, Link laughed, "Don't scare Rylai like that. Jacker, don't make that scary expression, and Lucy, stop holding your sword so defensively. Come, let us eat before we settle anything."

It's merely a challenge from a vagabond Magician. Link had just fought a Level-5 Necromancer recently, this Magician could not possibly be stronger than Shade.

If he was truly that strong, he wouldn't have needed to make use of Link to gain fame. It would be wiser for him to go straight to the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, where his abilities would be acknowledged and rewarded.

Besides, he simply wanted to enjoy his first meal with the mercenary band after his return. He did not want the atmosphere to become unpleasant because of a random outsider.

It would be rude for Jacker and Lucy to maintain their battle stance when Link himself

thought nothing of the situation. They were left with no choice but to resume their meal.

Half a minute later, a thin young man stepped through the door. He was around 28 years old and had a pale complexion. The bottom of his Magician robe was stained with spots of mud and he held a dark green wand in his hand. At the tip of the wand sat a huge green crystal the size of a pigeon's egg. Link could tell in an instant that this crystal was a low-level magic jade, while the staff body was made of azure marbled wood. These two materials were commonly used in the creation of magic equipment Level-3 and below.

The glorious sight and aroma of the delicious food caused the young man's nose to twitch uncontrollably. He swallowed a mouthful of saliva which caused his Adam's apple to bob ever so slightly upwards. Link took in all these tiny details and also took the chance to get a sense of the young man's magic aura.

He was not particularly sensing for the intensity of the magic aura. The intensity of a magic aura was usually an inaccurate indicator of the strength of a Magician. A Master Magician that had his Mana points completely depleted would have a magic aura similar to that of an ordinary old man. However, he definitely would not be classified as weak. Not to mention the array of tools that could be used to conceal your magic aura.

Link was trying to get a sense of the texture of the magic aura, something that only an experienced Magician could differentiate. It was something similar to the keen aesthetic vision that an artist would have.

For example, a painting would just be aesthetically pleasing to the ordinary human eye, but an artist would be able to glean more information from it, such as the message the painting was trying to convey.

This was the kind of intuitive and trained perception that would only be possible after a substantial period of immersion into the specific field of expertise.

Ever since Link stepped foot into the World of Firuman, Link had been focusing on learning magic and had been through way more battles than ordinary Magicians of his age. He had thus acquired this sensitivity.

After a few seconds, Link had come to a conclusion. The magic aura is not very pure,

only that of a Level-2 Magician. It is slightly scattered with traces of wind elemental energy. This is probably the result of not going through formal Magician training. Judging from his appearance, he is not doing very well on his own.

The moment he made this judgment, the in-game system had also conveniently analyzed and displayed the stats of this Magician in his field of vision.

Vagabond Magician

Level-2

Equipment: Green Jade Wand (Ordinary)

The in-game system did not provide much information, in fact, it was not even as much as what Link observed. However, Link was not disappointed. He understood that the system merely played a supporting role in his journey. He had to be able to read beyond what the system could offer in order to attain true strength, a strength that was not dependent on external aid.

After looking at the information of this young man, Link was struck by an idea. He wanted to take this person in as his second disciple. This Magician would be a timely addition to the mercenary band to increase its strength.

It was at this moment the young Magician spoke. He leaned his body over slightly at Link which was the standard greeting procedure between Magicians of the same age.

"My name is Carrido, a Level-2 Magician. I have heard stories about your magnificent exploits and would like to see your magic with my own eyes."

Link looked young and was able to concentrate his magic aura within himself extremely well. He thus did not emanate a strong magic aura. Carrido did not possess the kind of sensitivity that Link had and heaved a sigh of relief upon sensing an average magic aura. Before he met Link, he was actually really nervous.

Link was merely a teenager and looked ordinary from every angle. In comparison, the two Warriors beside him were exerting a lot more pressure than Link was.

Carrido had also inquired about the strength of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries. He knew that the well-built Warrior was Jacker, a Level-4 Warrior with a strong Battle Aura. The other beautiful woman was Lucy, who struck fear into the hearts of her

opponent with her Gale sword.

Both of them were staring at him with a hostile expression.

Despite the heavy pressure, Carrido was not afraid. He knew that Link would be concerned with the reputation of the mercenary band in River Cove Town and would not dare to do anything over the top. He would be safe.

Link tapped his finger lightly on the table to comfort a raging Jacker, before requiting Carrido with the same greeting.

"I am Link. As you can see, we are now having a meal. You look tired and hungry. If you do not mind, would you like to join us? We can talk about magic when we are done."

Before Carrido could reply, Link had already ordered a member to bring over another set of cutlery and food.

Link had a welcoming smile and a polite tone. Carrido was unable to refuse as much as he wanted to. He was a vagabond Magician of humble origins and managed to learn three simple spells with luck and some talent. The two Level-1 spells were Wind blade and Cyclone, while the other one was a Level-0 Illumination spell.

He was powerful in the eyes of an ordinary human, and could easily make use of his magic to make a decent living. However, he knew deep down that he was a down-and-out Magician.

His magic foundation was weak as he had not gone through any formal training. Whenever he went on a mission with a mercenary band, he could earn four to five gold coins per mission on good days. However, he heard that the apprentices in the magic academy could earn the same amount simply by writing a few magic scrolls and not putting their life on the line.

The difference was stark.

Even so, Carrido still persevered and continued to improve his magic skills. He spent most of his money on his magic research. His expenses were high to begin with as he needed to travel to River Cove Town all the way from the South. On the way, he also bought a foundational magic book from a merchant; it was written by a random Level-3 Magician who was academy trained. By the time he reached River Cove Town, he was nearly penniless.

He had no fame in River Cove Town and had difficulties gaining the trust of the citizens. People usually approached the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries when they encountered a problem. His revenue for the past few days was hence pathetic.

He had been eating nearly tasteless food ever since he stepped in River Cove Town. The sight of such a delicious spread almost drove him crazy.

Even though he knew his magic skills were at most ordinary, he was confident in his Wind blade spell and Cyclone spell as he had cast it countless times during his missions. Upon hearing that the Magician from the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries was returning, he had to pay a visit.

He knew that Link was studying in the East Cove Higher Magic Academy and that he was far weaker in terms of his magic foundations. However, he was confident in his skills when it came to actual combat. As long as Link's attention slipped up during battle, he would gain the upper hand.

If news of his victory over Link spread across River Cove Town, his reputation would increase exponentially. That would solve all his monetary problems in one go. As such, he made up his mind and went straight towards the base of the mercenary band. After all, the worst that could happen was for him to be defeated in battle and end up seriously injured.

However, he never expected Link to generously offer him a seat at the dining table.

Logically speaking, Link should be insulted that he barged into the mercenary band without any warning. This was akin to an open challenge! Shouldn't Link be fuming with rage and bombarding him with spells the moment he set foot in the dining room?

This is so strange!

Chapter 125

A Challenge from the Drifting Magician (3)

Although still in a confused state, Carrido sat down at the table where a shiny silver plate was laid out in front of him. On the silver plate was a mouth-watering piece of steak and the aroma that wafted from it was so appetizing that he could no longer hold himself back from tearing voraciously into it.

"How is it? Isn't it good?" asked Link with a smile, "Lucy prepared it herself, it's the best steak you can get in River Cove Town."

"It's delightful!" exclaimed Carrido, "It's the most delicious piece of meat I've ever had!" Grease was dripping down his chin as he munched on the food. A few moments later, he realized how rude he must've been, so he slowed down his eating speed a little.

After hearing this sincere praise of her food, Lucy began to warm up to Carrido and the severe expressions on her face began to soften. Jacker breathed a sigh and relaxed as well. The anger that distorted his face gradually dissipated, which calmed down the highly-strung atmosphere in the dining hall.

Seeing this, the girl Rylai could start to breathe easy again and she was finally calm enough to return to the half-eaten food in front of her. It was, after all, her favorite roasted steak that Lucy had prepared herself, so she wasn't going to waste a single bite of it!

Mmm, you really can't find a better tasting steak anywhere else! Lucy then put another bite into her mouth and slowly chewed it to savor the taste for as long as possible. After a while, she looked around again and saw that everyone was now in a good mood, so she went back to enjoying the food without any more worries.

Meanwhile, Link would chat with Carrido from time to time. He would bring up general news and gossip that was commonly talked about, never touching the subject of magic. Carrido himself didn't want to bring up the matter as it would be rude to do so to someone who'd received him so graciously as a guest—all he did was respond to Link's remarks with polite small talk and the atmosphere gradually became more

convivial as time went on.

When the meal was over, Link and Carrido were already on friendly terms. Nonetheless, Carrido hadn't forgotten his original intention in coming here. There was no use in delaying the matter anymore, so he decided to bring up the challenge now.

"Mr. Link," he began, as he wiped his lips and chin clean with a napkin that a servant handed to him, "Well, you see, I was here to..." He found that he was too embarrassed to continue, as Link had been treating him so well this far.

"I understand," said Link with a smile, "You're here to see how good my magic skills really are. Well, I guess I'll show you then."

He then stretched both of his hands out and placed them on the table with his palms facing up.

"Aren't you going to use a wand?" asked Carrido.

Link smiled and shook his head.

"Have you ever seen anyone bring their wand to the dining table?" replied Link.

Carrido now realized how rude he had been just barging in here so suddenly when it was obviously not the most convenient time for the young Magician at all. He reprimanded himself for not choosing a more suitable moment to challenge the young Magician.

"Just keep your eyes peeled, Mr. Carrido!" assured Link.

Just as he finished the sentence, the smile on Link's face disappeared instantly and his eyes looked cold and piercing. In hardly a second later, a Level-1 Whistle appeared above Link's left palm, and a Glass Orb appeared above his right palm.

These two spells appeared almost simultaneously to Carrido's eyes, and what was even more frightening was the fact that they were cast in what felt like less than a second!

In this simple move, Link had demonstrated two skills that Magicians coveted the most – the simultaneous casting of different spells and high-speed spellcasting!

Why did Magicians covet these skills the most? Because they meant raw and unadulterated power!

Carrido's jaw almost hit the floor by now. His eyes were fixed on the spells that emerged from Link's two hands and beads of cold sweat began to form on his forehead. The rotating metal spike and the dimly glowing solid fireball were nothing like what he'd ever seen before—this meant that they were no ordinary spells. These spells were modified by Link's own Supreme Magical Skill and that spelled one thing out loud and clear—Link was an unimaginably powerful Magician!

He's a master! A terrifying Master Magician! Carrido's heart almost jumped out of his throat. He knew now that if he were to face Link in a duel, he would be sent to the next life in a blink of an eye, before he could even lift a finger to attack this young Magician!

Moments later, the two spells disappeared and Link turned to Carrido with a smiling face.

"So, what do you think of my magic skills, Mr. Carrido?" he asked.

"Amazing! You're no ordinary Magician! I must concede to your superior skills!" said Carrido, but not without shame and regret. Still, he knew that it was the safest thing to do anyway. He wouldn't want to go up against this young Magician now that he'd seen his power!

Carrido then rose from his seat and was about to excuse himself, but Link stopped him before he could open his mouth.

"Mr. Carrido, I can sense that you are a gifted Magician yourself. Our troop needs someone like you. Would you like to join us?"

Link knew that Carrido was not a bad person by nature and he was not without talents. He was just unlucky enough to be born poor, so he was unable to receive any formal training in magic. When someone like this was given enough training and guidance—he could one day be a helpful and prominent figure in the mercenary troop.

Carrido hesitated for a while, then shook his head.

"No, I'm used to freedom," he replied, "So I don't like to be bound to anyone."

He didn't think that joining a mercenary troop was a terrible idea at all, only that this

particular troop seemed a little unpromising. He still had his pride as a Magician, after all, and when he considered it more carefully, he realized that the troop was just too new and too small. He could see that their headquarters weren't too impressive and that apart from a handful of core members, the rest were equipped with very basic gear and weapons.

If he decided to attach himself to such a troop, he feared that there wouldn't be much of a future in store for him.

Link actually understood Carrido's thinking and didn't expect that he would agree to join them the first time he asked anyway. He knew not to take offense from the rejection, but he wasn't going to give it up that easily.

"Oh, I understand. But if you had any problems that I may be able to help in the future, you can always come find me here. By the way, I think you'll find this helpful."

As he spoke, Link used the Magician's Hand to thrust a textbook titled *The Magician's Path* to Carrido. He knew that the drifting Magician only knew a few spells. Though he seemed to have mastered those few quite well, Carrido still lacked a strong foundation of magic theory knowledge, which was fine if he didn't wish to make much progress. However, if Carrido wanted to improve himself and become a better Magician, he would need to study the underlying theories and structures of magic spells.

Carrido quickly picked up the book, but his hands shook the second he noticed the book's title and author. It was a classic magic textbook written by a Level-7 Master Magician of the East Cove Magic Academy more than a century ago! The difference between this book and the other book he'd spent 5 gold coins on was like the difference between heaven and hell!

He flipped the book open and skimmed through it hastily. Now his whole body was shaking as he could discern how each sentence was packed with wisdom, with not a single word wasted on its pages!

He was sure that after reading this textbook, there would be a big leap in his understanding of magic!

"I...I...can't...it's too precious..." mumbled Carrido incoherently.

Carrido was aware of how the deepest and most profound knowledge in magic was locked up within the walls of the few ancient and reputable magic academies in the

Firuman Continent. This wasn't a result of any deliberate conspiracies among a tight circle of Magicians, but was in fact caused by the long-term accumulation of textbooks in the libraries of these academies.

Each magic academy invested a great fortune in creating the ideal environment to promote the research done by their Magicians. Once these the research yielded results, the Magicians would naturally record all their findings in their notebooks, which would then be stored in the academy library as textbooks. As time went on, the academy would house an accumulation of invaluable magic knowledge within its library walls.

Thus, these magic textbooks were among the most treasured objects in these magic academies, so they wouldn't just lend it to anyone. The textbook that Link had just offered Carrido, for example, could not be bought with any amount of gold coins, but could only be borrowed by the apprentices and Magicians of the East Cove Magic Academy.

For this reason, the dream of becoming a Magician was an almost impossible one for commoners. Even a rare genius like Eliard had stumbled upon some almost insuperable hurdles before he could enter the East Cove Magic Academy. So, it's no wonder that a Magician with average talents like Carrido would have to walk a treacherous path just he could reach this point.

"I can only lend it to you for one night," said Link with a smile, "So please return it to me tomorrow morning." There was a magic stamp on the textbook that would transmit its location, so Link wasn't worried even if this drifting Magician decided to run off with it.

"Thank you, thank you very much," said Carrido earnestly, "And I'll give your invitation to join the mercenary troop some serious thought." Carrido bowed deeply at Link and gently pressed the textbook to his chest. He then turned away and left the cabin.

Even when he was already out of the Flamingo Mercenary Troop's headquarters and was walking on the road heading back to River Cove Town, the image of the dark-haired Magician still floated in his mind.

He was born a lowly commoner and the only life he knew was the miserable life of a peasant; he knew nothing about honor, chivalry or courtesy. But he knew that the young Magician had treated him with kindness and respect, and that he felt at ease

and relaxed when he was around him.

Link had seen through Carrido's situation in a glance, but he never mentioned it aloud or mocked him. Though he had the right and the opportunity to demean and humiliate him, Link had chosen instead to treat him with generosity, as if he were a friend.

It's hard to believe that someone with such a formidable power would be so humble at the same time. Carrido had certainly never met such a person before in his life.

Carrido had a vague premonition that in a few years, the young man would be a bright shining star who would stand a head above all the Magicians of the Firuman Continent.

Have I just met a Legendary Magician in the making? Carrido sighed gently and began to seriously consider joining the Flamingo Mercenary Troop.

Chapter 126

The Magic Consultant of the Mercenary Band

As it was late after dinner, Link decided to spend a night at the base of the Flamingo Band of Mercenaries. He began to recharge the magic equipment that he previously created for the members of the mercenary band. Following which, he used the remaining silver he had to craft new magic equipment for both Jacker and Gildern.

This was to ensure fairness and prevent any form of treatment imbalance. Although Jacker and the rest were not particular about such things, Link simply liked to nip any hidden dangers in the butt before they could flourish. He was done with all these tasks by eight. As it was still early, he began to write some magic scrolls.

The mercenary band needed money to grow, and 1500 gold coins were definitely not enough. Link decided to give them one more push. He still had a substantial amount of magic scroll materials that Derek gave him stored in his dimensional pendant. After the incident, all of these materials naturally belonged to him. Link planned to finish writing them by today.

From recharging and crafting the magic equipment to the writing of magic scrolls, Link allowed Rylai to observe on the sidelines. Although she probably would not understand much of it at this point, it was important to expose her to such skills early. Rylai was both curious and in awe. She sat at the side and stared at Link with her huge blue eyes, holding her breath in fear of disrupting the intricate process. She could not understand what Link was doing, but was still extremely intrigued by the magic involved.

Link would not be writing an ordinary magic scroll today—he would be writing the Glass Orb spell.

Link was extremely familiar with this spell, so much so that the magic structure had already been engraved into his soul. He picked up the silver magic brush and almost completed the scroll in one stroke. The time needed to write the magic scroll was less than three minutes in total! This was an amazing speed even though it was just a Level-0 magic scroll. If any ordinary Magician were to see this scene, they would definitely be dumbfounded.

Link was not able to fully control the layout of the magic strokes in the first scroll and the resulting aesthetics were thus not to his liking. He modified the scroll to limit its explosive power and gave it to Rylai.

"You can have this."

"Thank you, teacher." Rylai obediently took the scroll and observed the magic structure with great interest. She looked like she had just gotten a new toy and couldn't stop fiddling with it.

Link optimized the magic layout on the second scroll and within three minutes, a scroll with beauty comparable to an exquisite artwork was completed. Rylai was immediately attracted to it, her eyes moving away from the roughly made scroll in her hand towards the intricately designed one in Link's hand.

"That is really beautiful." Naturally, young girls would be attracted to beautiful objects. The sight of this scroll made her eyes sparkle like stars in the night sky.

"Haha, this is not for you. We have to make money with these things," Link laughed.

Link carefully marked every completed scroll with a magic marking that was imbued with a magic storage structure. The stamp was in the shape of a soaring bird and exquisitely designed with sketches of the magic brush. It contained a small trace of his magic and was meaningful, elegant and eye-catching at the same time.

"What is this for?" Rylai asked, pointing at the magic marking. Link was an easy-going person in general; Rylai got more comfortable speaking to Link after every meeting and was now not afraid to ask questions.

"This mark...well, the people purchasing the scrolls can use this mark to determine its authenticity."

Link had decided to create a brand for himself. He would now add this magic marking to all his creations, be it magic scrolls or equipment. This marking would become the hallmark of a high-quality product. People purchasing items with this marking would also be reminded that this product was crafted by Link. If this succeeded, Link would definitely make a name for himself.

This was not his original idea, though. Many enchanters across the continent were already doing the same thing as its effectiveness had been positively conclusive. Many

people who purchased magic equipment did not have a background in magic, they hence relied on the brand name to distinguish the high-quality products from the low-quality ones.

Link started writing at an even faster speed for the next hour, averaging one minute per magic scroll. He wrote 60 scrolls in one sitting, only stopping when he had exhausted the materials that he had gotten from Derek.

He would give these scrolls to Lucy.

Lucy was a shrewd merchant and should be able to get a good price for these scrolls. If she sold it at the lowest price of 5 gold coins per scroll, that would be 300 gold coins' revenue for the mercenary band. For a layman organization, that was substantial income.

However, Lucy is not a Magician. Link was worried Lucy would be at a disadvantage during negotiations, but there were no better choices in the mercenary band.

Link kept the scrolls and brought out some other materials to create a temporary wand for himself. This wand was only of fine quality as it was simply a temporary substitute for the matchstick. It improved his magic power and spellcasting speed slightly.

When Link was done, it was already 10 o' clock. Rylai was already dozing off beside him. Link laughed and told her to rest for the night. Although she was extremely tired, she still tightly held the magic scroll in her hand and refused to let go. Link was slightly amused by the scene.

It was a silent night.

...

The next morning, the base of the mercenary band was once again bathed in the warm sun rays of the Girvent Forest. Link handed the magic equipment to Jacker who accepted it with glee.

He then handed the magic scrolls over to Lucy and told her the specific process of selling the scrolls. Link was once in charge of magic scrolls when he was in Bales' Mage Tower, and was thus familiar with the tricks merchants used. He was extremely detailed in his explanation with regards to bargaining and recognizing swindlers.

Even so, Link was still uneasy. Lucy was an outstanding merchant, but she was still after all, not a Magician. Link would be a lot more assured if there were a Magician in the mercenary band to hold the fort.

Speak of the devil.

Link was just getting worried when the vagabond Magician Carrido came to return the book. He looked extremely tired and had developed a pair of black circles. He must have been transcribing the book the entire night.

When he saw the carriage bearing the crest of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, his eyes brightened up for a moment before dimming in dismay. Not only were the tuition fees too expensive, he was also not talented enough. In essence, he was not qualified.

However, after a night of consideration, Carrido had made his decision. When he handed the book back to Link, he spoke seriously, "Mister Link, I would like to join your mercenary band."

Link had a bright future ahead of him. Even though his mercenary band had not achieved much as of yet, Carrido was confident that it would develop its strength in the years to come. More importantly, Link was a master in magic and was generous with his knowledge. He would be able to consult Link often if he joined the mercenary band and forge strong ties with him. These were great benefits.

Link smiled upon hearing those words, "Welcome!"

Jacker and Lucy were both open-minded people. The moment Carrido became one of them, they stepped forward to exchange warm greetings with him.

Lucy heaved a sigh of relief, "Carrido, you came just in time. With you accompanying me, I no longer have to worry about being cheated."

Lucy knew that Carrido only had respect and admiration for Link and was thus a trusted ally. He was also a Magician and would be of great help when she put the scrolls up for sale.

Carrido was confused, "I do not understand."

Lucy explained, "My lord gave me a batch of scrolls to sell. I don't quite understand

how the market for such items work and may require your assistance."

Magic scrolls? Carrido's eyes brightened. "Can I take a look?" This had clearly piqued his interest.

Lucy stared at Link for approval. Link nodded and said, "Carrido will be the magic consultant for our mercenary band in the future."

Lucy handed a scroll over to Carrido.

One look at the exquisite scroll material and Carrido could already determine that it was a high-quality product. He carefully received and unfolded the scroll. When he saw the magic formation on the scroll, he gasped in awe. Leaving the spell out of the equation, the skills needed to write a magic scroll this intricate were mind-blowing. He fondled the scroll with admiration, not willing to let go of it.

"The skills required to make this scroll is simply unbelievable. I am certain this scroll can sell for at least 20 gold coins," Carrido spoke with conviction.

"What? 20 gold coins? You mean the scrolls would fetch at least 1000 gold coins in total?" Lucy felt that the scrolls just got heavier.

"What do you mean 1000 gold coins...? Oh my, all these as well?" Carrido saw the stack of scrolls behind Lucy and couldn't help but walk towards it. He checked the scrolls one by one and could feel a slight dampness from the ink, still not completely dry from last night. The magic imbued on the scroll was very lively as well, suggesting that they were all newly crafted.

But how could 60 such exquisite scrolls appear overnight? Carrido could not wrap his head around it and looked to Link for answers.

Link simply smiled and said, "Carrido, accompany Lucy when she sells the scrolls and use the gold coins to develop the mercenary band. If you have any questions in your magic research, you can write to me anytime. I will do my best to answer them."

Those were the exact words Carrido wanted to hear. He suppressed his curiosity about the scrolls and bowed respectfully.

"I will try my best to sell them for a good price."

Carrido could almost see a halo forming above Link's head.

I've settled what I need to do and the mercenary band now has a Magician to hold the fort while I am gone. This is good news, Link thought happily and boarded the carriage together with Rylai, heading straight for the East Cove Higher Magic Academy.

Chapter 127

I'll Have My Vengeance!

Link was busy studying Anthony's notebook all along the journey to the academy. Rylai, who was sitting beside him was also reading a magic textbook, so it was very quiet in the carriage.

But after more than an hour, there was a sharp whistle outside the carriage. Link knew from the sound that it was no threat to them, so he paid no attention to it. The sound did unsettle the girl, though, so she slowly pushed the curtains of the carriage window aside and looked out in curiosity.

"Tutor," said Rylai timidly after a moment, "It's a carriage from the East Cove Magic Academy. No...it's not a normal carriage, it looks more like a prison carriage. There's a prisoner inside it too. Could he be a Magician?"

But how did a Magician end up being a prisoner? Rylai wondered.

Link was startled by Rylai's descriptions and he looked out immediately, just in time to see that it was Darris.

After a week of recovery, Darris' injuries were almost healed, but because he was treated with basic healing spells, he still had a lot of scars all over his body and even on his face. He was wearing a crude jailbird robe and his limbs were bound by iron shackles. He looked no different from any other common criminal, except for the fact that he was transported in a carriage with the East Cove Magic Academy insignia on it.

Just as Link caught a glimpse of Darris, Darris himself had turned his head around and saw Link, who was wearing a silver-lined ink-blue Magician's robe, sitting in a nice carriage.

Only Magicians of Level-4 or higher could wear the ink-blue Magician's robe. The silver lining on this type of robe was fine and graceful and the material of the robe itself was soft and comfortable. The robe was also protected by a Level-2 Guarding Barrier.

Then, Darris looked to Link's side and saw that he was accompanied by a beautiful young girl who looked so pure and innocent that any man would want to embrace her in their arms. This disparity in fortune between the both of them suddenly filled Darris' heart with painful bitterness.

"I curse you an agonizing death!" he shouted, his eyes bloodshot with animosity as he stared fixedly at Link.

Link shook his head at the pathetic sight before him. He thought nothing of it, as it was just the last cry of a man who'd lost everything. Link wasted no time and went straight back to reading the notebook.

Rylai, on the other hand, was considerably shocked by the scene, but she was also eager to find out what was going on.

"Tutor," she began tentatively, careful not to offend Link, "Why does he seem to hate you?"

"Pay no attention to him," said Link, smiling, "he'll soon be a dead man."

A Magician who had been stripped of his magic powers and was going to be tried for murder as a normal civilian wouldn't be able to escape execution because lay people were afraid of the powers that Magicians possessed. Once a Magician had been found guilty of murder, the civil courts wouldn't keep him alive for fear that he might try to attempt more crimes with his remaining powers.

Even if Darris was not sentenced to death on the spot, Link was sure that he would be secretly killed off afterwards. There was just no way that the court would take any chances with him.

And thus, a prison carriage and a handsome carriage crossed paths, each carrying their occupants towards two very different fates.

Darris' prison carriage continued to move forward. Although Darris had just shouted a curse at Link, it did nothing to distract him from the fact that his fear was deepening as the prison carriage kept approaching the River Cove Town.

Those damned commoners will never let go of me. I'll be dead, I'll be dead for sure. Ah, but I'm only 30 years old! Oh God of Light, why have you forsaken me so? Oh God... By that point Darris was about to collapse.

They were now approaching the eastern gates of River Cove Town and the spire of the eastern watchtower was now in plain sight. Only another ten minutes and they would be within the town gates.

"Hey, Armon, how about letting me go, huh?" begged Darris, "I'll give you a hundred gold coins if you'll let me go. I've got the money; I swear I do. Please, Armon..."

The coachman narrowed his eyes as he looked at Darris with disdain.

"Give it up, Darris. You just don't get it, do you? Well, let me tell you the truth. The coachman that you killed was named Eddie; he was my brother, my very own brother!"

Darris almost died of a heart attack and his whole body went limp as he realized that all hope was gone. But then, there was an unexpected turn of events!

The carriage was about to take a sharp corner where the trees on both sides of the road were very dense. But just as the prison carriage turned, a faint shadow suddenly flashed out of the woods.

The shadowy figure's speed was as fast as a gust of wind as he circled the prison carriage. In a few seconds, all four Level-2 Warriors escorting the prisoner fell dead on the ground. Shortly afterwards, the black shadow then approached the coachman and before anyone could see how what happened, the coachman fell clutching his throat. As his hands fell away when he hit the ground, one could see that there was a slash across his throat with blood gushing out of it.

Finally, the dark shadow reached Darris' side. With a few banging and clanging sounds, the carriage door was opened. It was only then that Darris could clearly make out the figure's appearance – he was clad in a brown leather armor and his face was covered in a mask, revealing only a pair of dark red eyes.

"You're a Dark Elf!" exclaimed Darris. He instinctively flinched away from the black figure. Humans and Dark Elves were sworn enemies, after all. In fact, the Norton kingdom was now preparing to go to war with the Dark Elf Kingdom of Pralync in the Black Forest.

"Don't you want to live?" asked the Dark Elf as he stared straight into Darris' eyes.

"Yes, of course I do!" said Darris as he nodded eagerly.

He'd thought that he was no longer afraid of death. But just as he came closer to the moment when he would be sentenced to death, his will to live had become more and more tenacious. All he wanted now was to be able to live on – he was willing to do anything in exchange for his life, even if it meant betraying his own kind and cooperating with the Dark Elves.

So long as I can live!

"Good!" said the shadowy figure. These type of people who wanted nothing more but to save their own lives had always been his favorite type to work with!

He pulled Darris out of the prison carriage, carried him by the collar and jumped out of the prison carriage. Before he left, he took out a magic scroll, activated it and flung it towards the prison carriage. Then, under a murky green flash of light, the entire carriage crumbled instantaneously into fine white sand.

Then, the figure carried Darris into the dense Girvent forest. He bolted through the forest for half an hour without taking any breaks, showing astonishing endurance.

Finally, they reached a clearing where another figure covered in a large black cloak was standing—the cloak covered most of his face. The wand in his hand indicated his identity as a Magician.

Hearing their quiet arrival, the figure turned around and spoke up in a hoarse voice, "Are you Darris?"

"That's me," said Darris as he took a deep breath and tried hard to calm himself down. He believed that these people wouldn't harm him, otherwise they wouldn't go through so much trouble to save him.

"Tell me, then, how familiar are you with the interior layout of the East Cove Magic Academy?" asked the cloaked figure.

Darris remained silent for a while. The question meant that these people were trying to attack the academy. It was also almost certain that they were Dark Elves.

"I've been staying there for 13 years," replied Darris, "I could get to anywhere I wanted within the academy gates with my eyes closed."

"Splendid! Do you want vengeance, then?" asked the Dark Elf again.

"More than anything else!" answered Darris immediately. The image of that proud and arrogant figure in the carriage was now floating in his mind. He remembered how that person was sitting comfortably in a handsome carriage with a pretty young maid by his side, heading towards glory and fame, while looking down on him with eyes that were full of scorn and contempt.

As he recalled the scene, the flame of anger burnt fiercely in Darris' gut and he felt it so violently that his body trembled.

I'll have my vengeance! There's nothing I wouldn't give to be able to kill that scum with my own bare hands!

"Good," the figure said, "Your Mana has been locked completely and I can't reverse that unfortunately, but the Silver Moon Mage Council can. I need you to do me a favor and then, I will give you 1000 gold coins as a reward. You can then bring the coins with you to the Black Forest where you will find someone who will take you to the Silver Moon Mage Council. There, they'll help you regain your powers and you can then come back and dish out your revenge. So, will you help me?"

"Yes," Darris agreed without any hesitation at all.

"Excellent," said the Dark Elf Magician. "So, I need a detailed layout of the defenses inside the East Cove Magic Academy, including the range and scope of the Watching-Eyes, all the rules and passcodes and so on without a single omission. Can you provide that to me?"

"Give me a day's time," replied Darris with a bitter smile. As a Level-4 Magician, an acknowledged genius, and the chief disciple of the master Magician Bale, he had been entrusted with great authority in the academy. He knew every single thing that the Dark Elf wanted to know in minute detail!

Chapter 128

Caged

After returning to the magic academy, Link naturally arranged for Rylai to stay in Herrera's Mage Tower as well.

When Eliard and Link tried to enter the academy in the past, they faced many difficulties. Not only did they had to pay exorbitant school fees, they were also rejected many times because of their perceived inadequate magic talent. On the other hand, Rylai got the opportunity to study magic at the academy without any difficulties as she had Link to pave the way for her.

Rylai's journey in learning magic was indeed smooth sailing.

Link had also returned to his daily routine back at Herrera's Mage Tower. He experimented with new Supreme Magical Skills, learned new spells, and most importantly, began crafting his new wand. Link was prepared to use up all the rare materials he had, such as the Perilla wood, precious thorium, fine gold and even the Domingo Crystal into crafting this powerful wand.

As Link was focusing on the creation of his new wand, Anthony and the Master Magicians from the six-man council had completed sealing Bale's magic powers. As planned, Bale would be sent to the Tower of Azura straight after.

Bale was forced into a sealed carriage which was escorted by four Magicians, at least Level-3 in strength, to the prison in the northwest corner of the valley.

As they were still under the real-time surveillance of the academy's magic eye, the four escorts were extremely relaxed. No one would dare to cause a ruckus in front of such heavy surveillance.

The four of them walked and chatted along the way; their conversations had nothing to do with Bale. In fact, they were merely fulfilling the orders of the six-man council, and had no idea the exact identity of the prisoner in the carriage.

The carriage traveled uphill along the narrow winding paths of the mountains for

about five minutes before reaching an empty field at least a thousand square feet in size. In the center of this open field was a pristine white tower. The tower was not tall, only consisting of three floors and about 30 feet in height. From its exterior, it looked just like an ordinary tower and was inconspicuous. However, it was actually home to all the demons, beasts, evil creatures and dark Magicians the East Cove Higher Magic Academy had caught and sealed over the past centuries.

When the carriage arrived, the door to the first layer opened. A masked Magician clad in a white robe walked out of the tower and rumbled, "Bring the prisoner to me."

This Magician was the guardian of the Tower of Azura and was known to be extremely powerful. His power was equivalent to that of a Level-5 Magician. The four Magician escorts wasted no time and obeyed his orders immediately. They unsealed the carriage and dragged Bale, who was clothed in a hooded black robe, out with force.

Bale kept silent the entire time. He did not show any resistance and was almost like a corpse.

He knew that he was going to spend an endless amount of time in this prison and experience extreme loneliness. The group of so-called masters in the six-man council were simply cowards. None of them dared to personally deliver the capital punishment on him in fear that it would sully their prestige. They thus resorted to such torturous means which kept him alive but bound him to an eternal life of suffering.

But what could he do? He had already lost his magic powers as well as his status. His half-converted body was even weaker than an ordinary old man. He was simply waiting for the grim reaper to knock on his door.

Bale sighed. His mind was now blank and numb to the outside world, passively awaiting the torment of his remaining years.

At this moment, Bale felt a tight squeeze on his hand by one of the escort Magicians who was supporting his body. This action felt unusual—it seemed to be a hint that something was going to happen.

What's going on? Bale was shocked.

Following which, Bale felt an object being stuffed into his palm. The object was the size of a thumb and was extremely hard, much like a small stone. The Magician escort

then clenched his hand into a fist, obviously signaling for him to hold on to the object tightly.

Bale was puzzled as to who would help him. He obeyed and clenched his fingers around the small stone.

The white-robed Magician took out his wand and pointed it at Bale. Bale immediately floated into the air and slowly drifted into the Tower of Azura, following behind the Magician's footsteps.

Bale felt the tower door close behind his back. From then on, his ties with the outside world would be completely severed.

Due to the failed transformation process, Bale had become blind and was unable to perceive his surroundings. He could vaguely feel that he was being led downward into an underground chamber.

After a full five minutes, Bale once again heard the voice of the white-robed Magician, "Master, this is your room. The walls are enchanted with a restrictive magic formation. If you don't wish to be hurt, please do not touch them."

Bale then felt himself being lowered onto the ground and a cool breeze on his back. Following which, he heard the sound of distant footsteps, which only lasted for around three seconds before his surroundings fell into absolute silence.

"The room is now completely sealed." Bale sighed. He was still clenching the mysterious stone tightly. To be safe, Bale waited a full hour before releasing his tight grip on the object and stroking it gently with his fingers.

The stone was warm to the touch and the intricate carvings on it could be clearly felt. It should be a type of magic rune. Bale groped these carvings slowly, trying to figure out what type of magic rune this was.

His sense of touch was not as sensitive as before. It took him an hour to finally come to a conclusion, "This is a communication rune stone!"

His magic power had already been sealed and he was unable to utilize the power of his Mana. However, this magic rune could be activated even by ordinary humans.

After fiddling with the rune stone for a while more, Bale found the location of the

trigger. He quickly erased the restrictive rune on the stone which caused minor fluctuations in the magic fields. Following which, a voice sounded in Bale's head.

"Is this master Bale?"

"Yes, I am, who are you?" Bale replied in his mind.

The voice disregarded his question and asked, "Do you wish to attain freedom and regain your magic powers?"

This was Bale's Achilles' heel. He immediately dropped his previous question and hastily asked, "You can help me?"

"Do you think I am wasting my time now?" The voice sounded like it was smirking.

"But I do not have any magic powers now. Anthony and five other Master Magicians collaboratively cast a restrictive spell on me. No one in the Norton Kingdom will be able to dispel it. Furthermore, what is the point of being free if I do not have my magic powers?" Bale sighed.

"Who told you it cannot be dispelled? And who says that I am a Magician from the Norton Kingdom? As long as you believe in me, anything is possible." The voice became slightly muffled, even to the point of being bewitching.

Bale fell silent. He then realized that his situation was truly the worst-case scenario. Even death would be better than the state he was in, thus, any changes could probably only go in a better direction. If that was the case, there was nothing to worry about.

"What do I have to do?" Bale asked.

"You are going to have to..."

The voice whispered in Bale's mind. As Bale listened, he became increasingly horrified. By the time the voice was done explaining, Bale was already shaking his head subconsciously.

"No, this would ruin the entire academy!"

"Do you really still care about the academy? The institution that imprisoned you and took away your magic powers?" The voice rebutted.

"I..." Bale was speechless. He was now a disgrace to the academy. The academy wanted to wash off any connections they had with a Magician who had fallen to the dark side. Even if the academy were to be utterly destroyed and the Magicians killed, it did not matter anymore.

"Do it, Bale. Put aside the friendships, morals and regulations binding you. They are merely hypocritical things that are restricting your freedom. You have to break the chains that are restricting you!" The voice grew louder and more passionate.

Bale kept silent for a long time. At last, he asked, "Who exactly are you?"

"I am the messenger of darkness, muahaha." The voice gradually became lower and Bale felt the stone tremble in his hands before it turned into a fine powder.

In the lonesome cage of claustrophobic darkness, Bale lay motionless on the ground. No one could tell what he was thinking about.

...

In the woods just outside the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, a black-robed Magician was hiding in the overgrowth, standing in front of a magic circle. He seemed to be protected by a blurred figure standing beside him. In the middle of the magic circle was a bright rune stone shooting a faint beam of light towards the sky.

Around half an hour later, the beam of light faded and the rune stone shattered into smithereens. The magic circle had also ceased its operation.

The dark figure immediately complained, "Felidia, do not make me do these things again. Infiltrating the academy was the scariest thing I've ever done in my life!"

"But it worked, didn't it?" This Magician was Felidia, the genius dark elf who once crossed swords with Link.

"It's still too early to determine our success. Who knows if the council idea will really work out? Furthermore, we cannot be sure that the idiot in the tower will follow our instructions."

"Relax, the chancellor is a Level-8 Magician. Even Anthony is not that strong. We have already sown the seeds of despair. All that's left is to wait."

"I hope so."

...

At the same time, Link, who had been staying in the Mage Tower, received a letter from Jacker. From the illegible handwriting, Link could determine that the letter was definitely written by Jacker. He tried hard to make out the message, squinting his eyes at every word. It seemed to be relaying a message from Royal Knight Anthony, complaining that Darris' carriage never arrived.

Link was shocked and immediately went to find Herrera.

Herrera, on the other hand, had already gotten the news some time ago. She had a serious expression.

"Darris is indeed missing. The academy has already dispatched investigators. I believe we will have some leads in the next few days."

"Why was I not informed?" Link had a hunch that this was the work of the Dark Elves.

"You have been busy with your new wand and I didn't want to interrupt your progress. Don't worry and wait patiently for the results," Herrera comforted.

That was true. Link was not godly and could not attend to every single issue in the World of Firuman. He had to spend time improving himself as well...he wished he had more time.

Please let it not be the tide of darkness...not now...

The only thing Link could do was to become even stronger in preparation for the calamities to come.

Chapter 129

The Magicians' Fair

Late night in Herrera's Mage Tower.

...

Link was lying in bed reading Lucy's letter. In it, she briefly summarized the whole situation the mercenary troop was facing and what transpired when they tried to sell the 60 magic scrolls from Link. Everything was described in Lucy's unmistakable joyful tone.

As Link had commanded, Lucy and a team of troop members had brought the scrolls to Springs City to sell them at the Magician's Fair. In the beginning, no one would bat an eye at the Glass Orb scrolls because none of the haughty Magicians and wealthy merchants would believe that mercenaries like Lucy and the others could ever get a hold of high-quality magic scrolls.

After a long while, Carrido desperately started to demonstrate the real powers of the magic scrolls by activating one of them in public.

A curious passer-by then bought the first one and half an hour later, they managed to sell the second one. After an hour, a merchant offered to buy all of the scrolls at the price of 1000 gold coins, but someone interrupted and stopped him from buying them all. A fight broke out eventually and Lucy wisely chose to stand aside and not interfere.

Half a day later, the fight turned into a huge scene and crowds gathered around it to come and buy the magic scrolls. Some of them weren't even Magicians and had bought the scrolls purely as a part of their collection.

Lucy found this curious, so she asked a buyer why everyone was fighting over these magic scrolls and was told that these had once appeared in the capital city some time ago. All the rich merchants were mesmerized by them and they were all snatched up at very high prices. But they suddenly disappeared without a trace for no reason and no one could find them anywhere else, so now that they had re-appeared everyone had to buy them up.

Link knew, of course, that it was Derek who had established a reputation for his magic scrolls.

Eventually they managed to sell 59 scrolls at an average price of 25 gold coins each, yielding them a huge sum of nearly 1500 gold coins in total. All of them were shocked when they counted the money at the end of the day – this was much more than they ever expected! They probably wouldn't even have earned this much had they been bandits robbing rich people for a living!

Lucy had also mentioned that many people who did not get to buy the magic scrolls were pestering them about where they got them from. Others offered to help them sell the scrolls. Those who were more attentive, on the other hand, noticed the signature on the scrolls and asked which Magician created them.

This meant that the demands for these magic scrolls were still high and that they would be sold out no matter how much Link could produce them.

Link smiled at this realization because he hadn't planned to prepare any more magic scrolls anytime soon. It was such a tedious task for him. Moreover, now that the mercenaries had earned 1500 gold coins from the scrolls, and they'd got the 1500 gold coins that Link had given them, they should already be well provided for in the next six months. There was no need for Link to return to such a mind-numbingly boring task as creating magic scrolls.

If he was short of money himself, then he'd just produce new magic gear and sell them instead, which would bring in much more profit than these magic scrolls.

Then, Link snapped his fingers and activated the Magician's Hand. A sheet of paper and a quill pen then floated in the air to Link's side. He then began to write his reply to Lucy.

He kept the letter short and straightforward. Apart from reminding Lucy to be careful and not to take any unnecessary risks, he repeated his order to pay close attention to the strange occurrences that might arise in the Girvent Forest. He then reiterated his instruction to inform him immediately about anything they might stumble upon about the Dark Elves.

The academy had made no progress in investigating Darris' disappearance almost a week ago. So far, they'd only found some minor clues that didn't seem to lead

anywhere at all.

Still, there was nothing Link could do at the moment, so he focused on his studies here in Herrera's Mage Tower. In fact, he'd gone through whole shelves of books in the library as fast as how sunlight melted the snow. His skills had advanced at a terrifying speed. His current level of knowledge was now in a completely different plane compared to what he knew just a week ago. The present Link could easily defeat that version of Link in a magic battle without much effort at all.

Once Link had finished writing the letter, he sealed it with wax and flung it out of his window. The letter then floated in the air and dropped accurately into the Mage Tower's mailbox near its front door. The messenger would then collect it and deliver it to the River Cove Town the next morning.

The rest of the night then passed in silence.

The next day, Link started his day early with his usual magic spell practice. Once he was tired with that he tried to create a new wand, then he would continue his work on his thesis. And that was how his days were spent as a Magician in the East Cove Magic Academy.

Time flew as Link continued to learn magic diligently every day. It felt as if a day passed within the blink of an eye and now, a month had already passed. The day for the Magician's Fair in the capital city that Herrera once mentioned had arrived.

There was still no news of Darris. It was as if he'd evaporated into thin air and the academy seemed to have given up on tracking him down. In fact, the Magicians tasked with the investigation had been ordered to return and there was nothing that Link could do about it.

Meanwhile, he had successfully created a new wand.

It was a spectacular wand that was dark purple in color with a metallic sheen to it lined with threads of thorium. At the tip of the wand there was a mesh made of gold that encased the Domingo crystal. Once activated by Mana and the elements, this crystal would glow in a bright fiery red light.

The fine gold mesh had a very intricate structure that was shaped like a pair of gentle hands. Meanwhile the crystal was like a bright burning sun. This made it seem as if the pair of hands were gently holding the sun in their palms.

The sun was a star and this star was clutched in a pair of hands – hence, Link named the wand the Starcatcher.

Starcatcher

Quality: Epic

Effect 1: Spellcasting speed increased by 60%.

Effect 2: Spell power increased by 70%.

Effect 3: When the Domingo crystal is activated, the elements stored inside will greatly enhance the spellcasting speed. (The Domingo crystal can store enough elements for a Level-5 spell.)

(Note: This is a fearsome wand that is full of vicious attacking powers!)

Of course it was full of attacking powers, Link had created the wand specifically to help him in battles. Its only limitation was that Link was unable to store a spell in it to enable instant spellcasting, although the elements stored in the Domingo crystal did make up for the shortcoming to an extent.

In addition to the wand, Link had also created a thorium ring for himself in which an enhanced version of the Edelweiss spell was stored.

How was the spell enhanced? It was a Level-4 Edelweiss, his latest achievement, which incorporated a recent discovery he made through his thesis. The defensive power of this spell was very close to that of a Level-5 defensive spell. With this ring, he could instantaneously release the powerful Edelweiss shield, and this made it his best self-defense gear thus far.

Link still had quite an amount of Mithril left after creating the wand and the ring, so he created three pieces of magic jewelry from the leftovers, namely a necklace, a bracelet, and a ring. He didn't spend much effort or used any special materials on the jewelry. Their only purpose was to get him some gold coins at the Magician's Fair which he would then use to buy more quality materials.

"Link, hurry up! It's time to go!" It was the sound of Eliard urging Link at his door.

As expected of a gifted Magician, Eliard had now mastered three Level-1 spells and

was even starting to dip his toes in some Level-2 spells. Apart from Link, no one had managed this kind of progress for centuries in the Firuman continent's history.

Eliard was going to the Magician's Fair with Link and Herrera. He'd even prepared some magic scrolls to sell there too.

"Yes, coming," said Link. He'd put on an ordinary gray Magician's robe today to hide his identity. It was Herrera's idea, as she thought that one couldn't predict the kind of crowd the fair would attract. It was better not to stand out too much in case it might draw the wrong kinds of attention to them.

Link noticed how Eliard was wearing a plain gray robe himself when he came out of his room. But despite the modest attire, Eliard still looked spectacular as his strikingly handsome face would no doubt entice the stares of the crowd.

"Hurry up, Tutor Moira is waiting for you," said Eliard.

"Alright, alright, let's go," answered Link.

Link and Eliard then walked side by side down the stairs to the first floor of the Mage Tower. Then suddenly, a girl rushed up to Eliard and kissed him passionately on his lips.

This female apprentice was none other than Elena, the person Link had always seen as very shrewd and cunning. She had by now successfully gotten under Eliard's skin and became his lover. Eliard seemed to like her enough to give her special tutoring sessions that had helped Elena's magic skills to advance almost to that of a Level-1 full-fledged Magician now.

Since it was Eliard's personal business, as a friend Link couldn't interfere much with it. He couldn't risk souring their friendship just because of a girl.

"Good morning, Link," greeted Elena in a warm and friendly tone, as she always did.

"Good morning," answered Link with a smile. He had to keep a friendly facade as she was Eliard's girlfriend after all. Fortunately, though, Elena was perceptive enough to know that she should keep her distance with Link. She had wisely not caused him any trouble so far.

The carriage was already waiting for them outside the door. It was a four-seater

carriage and there were already two people inside – Herrera and Rylai.

Herrera was fond of Rylai the moment they met each other as the girl was adorable and full of a childlike innocence. She was also Link's disciple. Herrera had decided to take her to Springs City so she could show the girl the sights of the biggest city in the kingdom.

Once everyone was in the carriage, Herrera turned to the coachman and said, "Let's go!"

With a crack of the whip, the carriage set out and headed towards Springs City. On the way, Link noticed how many other carriages were also heading towards the same direction. It seemed the Magician's Fair was going to be especially lively this time around.

Chapter 130

Confrontation in the Dark

As Link was on his way to the Magician's Fair in Hot Springs City, another black carriage was similarly, heading down King's Lane to take part in the symbolic festival. If anyone were to peek inside the carriage, they would certainly be horrified to see two Dark Elves sitting leisurely inside.

One of the was Felidia, while the other was an old friend of his who stayed at the Cliff of Howling Winds. If Link were to see this elf, he would definitely be able to recognize him through the scar that ran across his left eye.

His name was Ainos, a genius Dark Elf Assassin. He was only a few years older than Felidia but had already attained the power of a Level-4 Assassin. He could probably achieve a breakthrough and reach Level-5 in half a year's time.

"Feli (Felidia's nickname), our activities in the Girvent Forest are already extremely dangerous—to attend a crowded festival in Hot Springs City right after that is close to suicide!" Ainos had a worried expression on his face. In fact, he had been close to breaking down ever since he heard of Felidia's plan.

Felidia was casually dressed and not in his usual black robe. He had tied his natural curls into a ponytail which revealed his devilishly charming face he kept hidden all the time.

If one were to ignore the dark red eyes and the gloomy pale complexion, Felidia was definitely handsome even by human standards.

Felidia was carefully putting a thin layer of foundation on his skin. When the foundation made contact with his skin, the pale complexion turned into one that was healthy and rosy. He was thorough and made sure to leave no areas untouched, dabbing his neck, hairline and even the back of his ears compulsively.

He then passed the paint to Ainos before casting a water mirror spell to check if he left out any areas.

"The Norton Kingdom's Magician's Fair is a major affair and attracts a huge crowd. No one would cause a ruckus or even take much notice of us. Furthermore, a Magician can find all the magic materials he needs in one place—how can I possibly give up on this chance?" After making sure that his foundation was perfectly put on, Felidia then took out two thin circular black crystal pieces and placed them in his eyes. After a few blinks, his pupils had turned black.

After a detailed make-up session, Felidia had transformed into a young man with black pupils and curly brown hair. Ainos also completed his disguise hastily, opting for the brown eyes and golden locks instead.

"I will say this beforehand. If we are exposed, I will be the first one out of Hot Springs City. Don't even expect me to save you." Ainos was still dissatisfied.

Felidia looked at him with puppy eyes and sulked, "You are really going to leave me behind?"

"Get out!" Ainos fanned his hands in disgust.

Felidia laughed before speaking in a serious tone, "Actually, we are not here only to purchase magic materials. We have an important mission to accomplish."

Ainos expression went solemn as well. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"I just received the news. This mission is a secret mission directly from the queen. There has been news that a young high elf of important stature is also going to attend the festival. Our mission is to kill him. Alina is also going to join us this time."

Ainos eyes widened upon hearing Alina's name, "This young high elf is that important?"

Alina

29 years old

Level-5 Swordsman

Weapon: Sword of Shattered Stars

Alias: Constellations Assassin

(Note: She is the youngest genius swordswoman the Pralync Kingdom has seen in centuries!

Ainos, Felidia and her were considered to be the three musketeers of the Silver Moon Alliance. Among the three of them, Alina was undoubtedly the strongest.

She came from a prominent background. Her father was the patriarch of the Norigan family, one of the three largest families in the Silver Moon Alliance. She was also a core member of the Kingdom Warrior Academy, holding the achievement of killing a pure-blooded black dragon by herself. Her talent coupled with her flawless beauty and cold demeanor had given her the accolade of "Dream Goddess".

Ainos was also slightly attracted to Alina. However, the stark difference in their status was too glaring. He hence kept this fantasy in the deepest part of his heart.

To think that the kingdom would send Alina for this mission—it seemed like the mission was of great importance.

Felidia smiled, "His name is Phillip, 15 years old, the youngest and most cherished son of the elf queen. What do you think will happen if he is met with misfortune in Hot Springs City?" Felidia looked exceptionally handsome in his human disguise, especially when he smiled.

Ainos eyes lit up. "The queen would definitely be heartbroken. If the prince of the high elves died in Hot Springs City, there is no way the Norton Kingdom could give an acceptable explanation. Even if the high elf queen let the incident slide, this would worsen the already shaky relationship between humans and the high elves. There would then be no chance of an alliance between the two races. However, this has to be handled very carefully. It is easy to get ourselves in trouble."

"Naturally," Felidia laughed, "We will not be the one taking any action. We will merely be working behind the scenes and watch as the human race turns against themselves in an internal conflict. If Phillip is still alive after the chaos, we merely have to deliver the finishing blow."

...

Despite the Dark Elves' plan running ever so quietly, it did not escape the eyes of the Nordic Kingdom's resourceful and observant military.

The southernmost military zone of Hot Springs City

...

A courtyard was barricaded by tall walls and a sturdy gate; the buildings in the courtyard were all made from a sturdy mineral called bluestone. There were sentry posts erected at every key location and even prowlers circling the courtyard in shifts. The whole place simply looked like a military fortress.

The parliament hall on the second floor.

...

Ten middle-aged men clad in exquisite cyan leather armor and a dagger on their waist were seated in a circle around a long table. They had a majestic lion crest pinned onto their neat uniforms.

They looked serious with a calm temperament. The Battle Aura emanating from their bodies was concentrated and deep—they were all masters.

There were a number of documents on the table. One of them pulled out a specific file and said, "The recent pursuit of the Dark Elves has been a success. We have basically eliminated all the Dark Elves in the kingdom. However, there have been traces of Dark Elven magic in the Girvent Forest recently."

He then passed the document to the man seated at the front of the long table, presumably the leader. The leader seemed to be covered with a faint grey aura, masking his facial features. While his armor was also cyan in color, the design and the Battle Aura emanating from him was clearly different from the rest. He also wore a gold cloak to differentiate himself from the rest.

"Duke sir, the recent happenings in Girvent Forest have been recorded in detail in this document. Please take a look."

The person who was honored as Duke picked up the document and started reading. After five minutes, he gently put down the file and asked, "I am interested in this young Magician called Link. To think that he could defeat the Necromancer who was hiding in his Mage Tower. I am curious as to how he did it."

The man who handed him the file previously seemed to have expected this statement and immediately handed over another one.

"We have already done in-depth research into this young man's background. You can view them in this document."

The duke took the file and read with interest. It contained a lot more information than before and it took him a good ten minutes before he was done.

"The youngest son of Hamilton. First appeared at the Lower Magic Academy of Flemmings. Defeated Lund with a Flame Blast spell and... is regarded by the Light Maiden as the Chosen One?" The Duke looked at the document with a dubious expression.

"Areve, is this true?" He looked at the middle-aged man beside him. This person was the duke's most trusted aide.

Areve shrugged his shoulders, "There is no reason not to believe it. Even if he is not the Chosen One, it is clear that he is a talented Magician. If the Light Maiden favors him this much, he should not be our enemy."

Herrera was referred to as the Light Maiden in the hexagon military bureau. This was due to her outstanding talent in the area of light elemental magic.

"Well, then." The Duke smiled and tapped his finger on the table. He thought for a few minutes and said, "The Dark Elves must be planning something if traces of their magic were discovered in the Girvent Forest. I believe it is a matter of great importance. Their actions have also become more frequent recently. If my predictions are not wrong, it should be related to Prince Phillip. We have to watch him carefully and make sure he is safe."

Prince Phillip was way too important. In times of a war, in the shadows against the Dark Elves like this, they definitely had to strengthen protection; the hexagon military bureau would not be enough.

The Duke thought for a moment before telling his aide, "I have some matters to talk to Olaf (Commander of the Royal Forest Guards) about. Areve, you take charge."

The Hexagon Military Bureau was made up of Assassins. They were adept at setting up sneak attacks, but lacked direct combat abilities. If they wished to ensure Prince

Phillip's safety, they would require the help of powerful Warriors. The Royal Forest Guards fit this role perfectly.

Chapter 131

A Mysterious Woman

Springs City, the royal capital of the Norton kingdom, was a city that had suffered countless wars and attacks, yet it had never failed to recover from them. It had become, as it was now, a city teeming with the hustle and bustle of life.

Facing the ongoing threats of barbarous tribes from the North, the city's walls were built to be both imposing and intimidating to ward off possible invasions. It was at least 160 feet tall, and its gate was 70 feet wide and 140 feet tall. As the carriage entered the city through the gate, Link felt as if he were a tiny ant crawling under a colossal giant's foot.

"Tutor, look!" exclaimed Rylai. "Isn't that a dwarf?"

As the capital city of the kingdom, Springs City was naturally a place where countless walks of life crossed paths. Apart from humans, all other races of the Firuman continent – the dwarves, the elves, the goblins and so on – roamed the streets here.

Rylai had followed her father around different cities in the South when she was a child, but at the time they lived a life that was always on the verge of danger. They were too busy being cautious that all Rylai could do was catch a hurried glimpse of the sights around her. But now that she knew that her life was in no danger at all, she seemed to have gotten past her grief for the death of her family and her personality started to bloom into a vivacious girl. She was eager to learn and was open to the new sights and sounds around her. Indeed, her presence had lightened up the atmosphere in the carriage and made their journey much livelier.

As they entered the city gates, the carriage headed straight to the Magician's District in the southern part of Springs City.

The Magician's District wasn't actually a place exclusively reserved for Magicians. In fact, there were as many ordinary city-dwellers there as there were in other parts of the metropolis. The only reason why it was named so was that any Magician visiting the capital would flock there; it was where all the shops selling anything related to magic was situated. Naturally, the Magician's Fair was held there as well.

The journey felt brief to all four people in the carriage because Rylai had kept the journey interesting as she had been pointing and asking questions all along the way. And thus, in what felt like no time at all, they'd reached the Magician's District and were now entering the best inn in the area – the Blue Hermit Inn.

The inn was already overcrowded when they arrived and most of the inn's guests were Magicians who were here to participate in the Magician's Fair just like them. Luckily, they had the East Cove Magic Academy's reputation to thank, as the inn had reserved a number of rooms especially for Magicians from the academy each year around the time when the Magician's Fair was held. Because of that, Herrera managed to get them two rooms, one for her and Rylai and the other one for Link and Eliard.

When they'd all settled down, it was already around five in the afternoon, so they decided to have an early dinner. After being excited for the whole day, Rylai was now exhausted and she kept yawning after the meal, so Herrera lead her to the room so she could get some rest. The industrious Eliard excused himself to the room as well so he could get back to studying. In the end, Link was left alone in the main hall of the inn.

He didn't feel tired enough to rest yet, nor did he felt like reading, so he ordered a glass of wine and sat in a remote corner of the hall looking around, observing the Magicians who came in and out of the inn.

There were Magicians who traveled alone, some were with companions, while some had come with their disciples. There were even some drifting Magicians who were here to try their luck in making a name for themselves. Link even recognized some of the Magicians in the hall – they were from the East Cove Magic Academy. Even so, he'd never talked to them and didn't even know their names, so all Link did was nod to them politely and stayed where he was without making any attempts to approach them.

Learning magic consumed most of a Magician's time anyway. Unless they were staying in the same Mage Tower, the Magicians were usually unacquainted even if they were from the same academy.

Then, a Magician dressed in a gray Magician's robe walked in. He was also donning a wide-brimmed pointy hat and had a long gray beard. The moment he stepped into the hall, everyone turned momentarily silent, then hushed murmurs began to fill the hall.

"Look," someone whispered, "it's the Wand Master Hermira."

"I never thought I'd see him here!" someone else exclaimed. "His wands are simply works of art!"

"Oooh, maybe he's going to unveil his latest masterpiece at the fair!"

Link's interest was piqued at the mention of this name and his head immediately turned to the figure in question. Master Hermira was of course the maestro of enchantment. In fact, the first wand he'd used when he first arrived in this world – the New Moon wand – was one of the master wandmaker's earliest creations!

Master Hermira was only a Level-4 Magician, yet most renowned pieces of low and mid-level magic gear in the game were his creations. Even Link's first Epic quality wand in the game which he acquired when he reached Level-4 was made by the old man. He was quite fond of the wand and he had used it up until he reached Level-4, so Master Hermira had left a deep impression on Link.

Three minutes after Hermira's arrival, a middle-aged man with ink-blue hair and a well-built body appeared, triggering a wave of excitement among the crowd in the inn hall.

"That's Morrigan!" someone pointed out. "He's the renowned adventurer!"

"Oooh," someone else chimed in, "I wonder what he's brought back this time!"

This Morrigan was evidently a crowd favorite. Many men approached him and struck up conversations with him and he greeted them all with a warm and friendly smile on his face.

Link was familiar with Morrigan too. This man was a Level-3 Magician. He might look unremarkable outwardly, yet, he was in fact a bold and courageous man whose reputation lied in his adventures to the remote parts of the continent. He was known by his many nicknames, among which the best one was probably the King of Explorers. His other ones were the Relic Hunter, the Excavator and some people had even called him the Grave Robber.

To his credit though, Morrigan had indeed been to all corners of the Firuman. He'd left his footprints on most of the monuments and ancient sites on the continent. In fact, you could accurately describe the man as a walking and talking map.

Link took another sip of his wine. He felt the Magician's Fair was definitely going to be

interesting this year.

The ripple of excitement caused by Morrigan calmed down gradually and the atmosphere in the hall began to return to normal. Just then, a woman turned up at the entrance. Even in the distance Link could tell that her skin shone like crystal and her eyes sparkled as if they were lit by the moonlight. She was clad in a simple black dress, yet there was something about it that made it look luxurious and elegant despite its modest style.

All eyes were now fixed on the woman. No one knew her name, though, and the hall was dead silent.

Link was also observing the enigmatic woman in the corner of the hall. At first glance, he thought the woman looked beautiful and charismatic, yet the more he looked at her the more his eyebrows began to knit.

He sensed something uncanny about the woman. He could feel that she was concealing her true powers, yet even so, Link could nonetheless sense that she possessed a powerful soul. She was probably even more powerful than a saint or an angel. But what was even more menacing was the hint of dark aura that seemed to shroud the woman's body.

The dark aura was almost pulsating – at times it was intense, yet sometimes it was hardly there. Somehow this abnormality sent a chill down Link's spine and it even made his skin feel numb.

It was clearly a red flag!

He'd encountered some imposing figures before – the Dark Elf genius Felidia, the Dark Elf General Lund, Occult Viktor – yet none of them had ever elicited such a strong reaction from him. His head was then filled with a whirl of questions.

Who is this woman? There's a dark and powerful aura coming from her. The strength of her Mana is on par with that of Level-6 Magician! But she looks too young to be a Level-6 Magician!

Link ran through his memory of the game in his past life but found no one matching the woman's characters. Perhaps she's under disguise, he thought. He dared not catch her attention, so he quickly diverted his eyes away from her and stared at his cup of wine instead.

Then, susurrus whispers filled the entire hall.

"Who is she?" asked a man in the hall.

"Has anyone seen her before?" said another.

"She's no ordinary woman, that's for sure." Those words came from Morrigan himself. It seemed as if he sensed something dangerous in the woman as he quickly averted his eyes away from her the moment he caught a glimpse of her.

"I've never met a woman with such an enchanting air about her in my life!" someone else exclaimed.

The woman in black didn't seem to mind the gazes she attracted all around her at all as she walked gracefully into the inn hall. She wore a radiant smile on her face, so sweet and beguiling that it made her lips look like a blooming rose. Men around her couldn't help but gulp and gasp at such an alluring sight in front of them. Most of them were hardly able to rein in the surge of desire building up inside them.

Not all men had the same reaction, though.

The explorer Morrigan was initially chatting and drinking with his friends at the bar, but the moment the woman appeared, his manner changed. He flinched and shrank away from her, then downed his drink in one gulp and slunk away into the furthest corner of the hall. Then, without a word to anyone, he rushed quietly out of the room.

He went past Link as he slipped out of the inn hall, so Link stood up and quietly followed him. Though he did find the woman suspicious, he was even more intrigued by Morrigan's reaction to her.

Once they were about thirty feet away from the inn, the explorer suddenly stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to face Link.

"Who are you?" he barked. "Why are you following me?"

Link turned his gaze back to the inn, revealing a hint of dread in his expressions as he did so.

"I just found it odd," said Link, "how such a bold man like you would be afraid of that woman in black."

Morrigan's face turned pale the moment he heard Link's words. He glanced furtively left and right to make sure no one was spying on them before he made his reply.

"I don't know who or what that woman is," said Morrigan in a hushed voice, "but I know that I could sense an icy and sinister aura emanating from her body. I've sensed this aura before in the ancient ruins in my travels. A word to the wise, kid – stay away from her!"

As he finished his sentence, Morrigan hurriedly turned away and fled. Judging from the direction he was heading to, Link could see that he was leaving the Magician's District right away.

Morrigan's actions had unnerved Link so he decided to promptly return to the inn, where he found that the woman in black was no longer in the main hall. From what he heard of the crowd's conversations, Link guessed that she must've gone to one of the rooms in the inn.

Link had no idea why, but he suddenly felt an ominous sense of danger looming over him. He then rushed to the third floor to find Herrera and Eliard. He had to warn them about this mysterious and possibly dangerous figure who'd just turned up at the inn. If things didn't seem right, they might even need to leave this place as soon as possible.

But just as he reached the second floor, Link caught a sight of a dark figure in the corner of his eye. He turned his head slowly towards the direction and had the shock of his life when he realized that it was the very same woman in black right there in front of him.

She was standing in the dark corner quietly watching Link. The beguiling face Link saw earlier had now become expressionless, and her almond-shaped eyes were now staring straight at Link, as cold and piercing as needles.

Chapter 132

A Hundred Years of Solitude

In an instant, Link switched to his battle mode and the wand of constellations appeared in his hand. Mana surged into the wand and three glass orbs were formed at its tip in a flash. Under the combined effect of the state of Gibraltar, the Domingo Crystal and his familiarity with the Glass Orb spell, the casting time was almost instantaneous.

Link would release the three glass orbs without hesitation the moment his opponent made a suspicious move.

Link's casting speed came as a shock to the woman. She then adopted a less hostile expression, more accurately, a hint of fear could be seen.

"You won't poke your nose into others' affairs, will you?" The woman in the black dress finally spoke. She had a mellifluous voice, the kind that could charm the hearts of many men.

However, Link knew that this voice was also her weapon, a weapon that could bewitch her opponents. It was very likely that a murderous intent lay behind the sweet and delicate voice.

This female Magician could possibly have the powers of a Level-6 Magician. Link did not have the confidence to win against her in a one-on-one battle. He chose to stabilize the situation and not react aggressively.

"I find it troublesome to involve myself in others' affairs. But I am not afraid to do so if required."

"That is a wise choice. However, I do not believe that you—this lady is?" The black-dressed woman stopped in the middle of her sentence, distracted by something she saw at the corner of the third-floor staircase.

At the corner, Herrera stood quietly with her crystal staff in her hands.

Link immediately greeted, "Teacher."

The faint cold aura that was circling the black-dressed woman disappeared entirely the moment Link spoke. She smiled and said, "So this is your mentor, presumably also an extremely powerful Magician. If you will excuse me."

The woman did not return to her room, but instead walked down the stairs to the first floor of the hall. The hall fell silent for a few seconds before turning back to the normal again.

Judging from the quick fluctuation of the sounds coming from the hall, the woman must have left the Blue Hermit Inn immediately.

Link heaved a sigh of relief and felt a breeze of cool air on his back. His undershirt was already fully soaked with his perspiration.

Herrera had a serious expression on her face and asked, "I could feel your magic aura from afar. What happened? Who was that woman?"

Link then recounted his experience to Herrera, starting from the incident in the hall to what just happened on the stairs, leaving out no details. As he spoke, Herrera kept a tight frown.

By the time Link was done, she looked pale and said, "If I had arrived a bit later, you might already be injured."

"Yes, I could feel it too," Link nodded. That cold aura was one of the most uncomfortable things he'd experienced ever since he stepped foot into the World of Firuman. It felt like he was being submerged into a freezing lake, the bitter cold penetrating deep into his bones.

If Herrera had not appeared in time, there was no telling what she would have done to Link.

"Teacher, Morrigan mentioned that there was something chilling about this woman's aura. Did you sense anything out of the ordinary?" Link asked.

"I think she's a Magician specializing in secret spells. I can almost confirm that she had also done her fair share of black magic research. As for the chilling aura...I would say it is present. In fact, the aura felt like it was born from the vicissitudes of life she had

been through. If I am correct, she might be older than both of our ages added together—presumably over 100 years old."

Herrera was living up to her name as a Level-6 Magician. She was way more detailed in her observation as opposed to Link's.

"She probably left because she knew she was not strong enough to take on the both of us at once. It is also possible that she was afraid to expose her identity," Link said.

"I agree," Herrera nodded, "Even if she is strong, she probably would not dare to cause a ruckus in Hot Springs City. The most probable explanation for her appearance would be the Magician's Fair. She should be here to exchange some magic materials. Recalling the situation now, she was probably attempting to cast a hypnosis spell on you so that you would forget her existence."

Link mulled over it for a moment. There were many Master Magicians in Hot Springs City, especially so in the Magician's Fair. The woman would only get herself into trouble if she tried to injure him. There was no reason to do something so risky.

"What do we do now?" Link asked.

"What do you think?" Herrera threw the question back at him.

"Let's just pretend it didn't happen. She is not dangerous per se. If she was really planning something dangerous, she would have been more careful of her actions," Link reasoned.

Herrera smiled and said, "Indeed, you will see all sorts of people in the Magician's Fair—even some Master Magicians who kept themselves hidden for some personal reasons. This is also partly where the charm of the Magician's Fair lies."

Both of them then returned to their rooms to rest for the night.

Outside the Blue Hermit Inn.

...

The woman in a black dress was hiding in the alley opposite the Inn, observing the

situation closely. She waited for a full hour, making sure that no peculiar magic disturbance could be felt before she finally let down her guard.

"Magicians from the Easy Cove Higher Magic Academy? I was too careless," she whispered.

The Magician's Fair in Hot Springs City was a grand festival in the World of Firuman. One could purchase almost every magic material in the world as long as they were willing to pay the price.

Her name was Eleanor, a Level-6 Magician specializing in secret magic. Recently, she was studying a type of secret magic known as prophecy spells and needed some Soul Stones for her research. Hence, she took the risk and came to Hot Springs City, but not without carefully concealing her magic aura.

She did not attempt to change her appearance. She looked exactly like how she did when she was 18 years old. She had preserved this appearance for the past 90 years using forbidden magic, and was extremely pleased with the results.

She had become a Level-6 Magician after 90 years of magic research and had mastered countless magic spells. She thought that none of the Magicians in Hot Springs City could hold a candle to her power. However, it didn't take long before her confidence was shaken.

Both a tomb raider and a young Magician not older than 20 years old saw through her disguise almost immediately. That was not all! The spellcasting speed of the young Magician was simply mind-blowing. With that kind of speed, she might even lose to him in a battle. She didn't even factor in the power of his mentor.

"There are so many geniuses in the world," Eleanor sighed. Her magic talents were average at best, especially her Mana pool. After 90 years of magic research, her Maximum Mana was only at the level of an average 30-year-old Magician. This was her greatest insecurity. However, her 100 years of experience was still not something to be trifled with. She quickly recollected herself.

It doesn't seem like they want to pursue the matter. Eleanor then returned back to the Blue Hermit Inn after some thought.

They seemed like people who could be reasoned with. As long as I don't do anything that crosses the line, they will probably leave me alone.

Eleanor was way more careful the second time she entered the Inn. She no longer flaunted her charming appearance and youth, deliberately putting on an oversized cloak to conceal her voluptuous figure. She did not want any more attention for the day.

Eleanor couldn't fall asleep after returning to her room. As she had been living in seclusion and was researching into black magic. She had practically no friends and no one to talk to. As she was feeling bored, she cast a spell, Eye of the Soul.

Eye of the Soul

Level-1 Secret Spell

Effect: Gives the user long distance vision and ignores material barriers.

(Note: This spell is extremely discreet)

Eleanor had developed this habit ever since she started living alone. It would be hard to change it now.

She originally planned to simply look around to relieve her boredom. However, her attention was captured by the young Magician who left a lasting impression on her at the staircase.

She was also interested in Herrera but kept her curiosity under control. She would not risk getting discovered by a Level-6 Magician.

Chapter 133

An Endless Night (1)

The attacking power of secret spells might be inferior to that of elemental and light spells, but they still held an edge over all other types of spells in one aspect – its discreet nature.

When Eleanor used the Eyes of the Soul to observe the inhabitants of the Blue Hermit Inn, none of the Magicians there, no matter their levels, were even suspecting of her spell's intrusion. Although there was no denying that her superior spellcasting skills and her inclination for caution had played a big role in the matter as well.

When she was spying on Link's room, neither he nor Eliard had any inkling of her presence and none of them had set up any kind of defense to prevent such an intrusion. In fact, the young Magicians were currently passionately discussing their recent discoveries in magic.

"I've been studying your Whistle spell recently and I've got a question," said Eliard. "Take a look at the joint of this runic wheel. Do you think it would be better this way?"

A big scroll was spread out on the table and on it was the structure of the spell. Eliard took a quill pen and sketched a dozen slight modifications on the scroll, completely transforming the spell structure of the Whistle into something quite different.

These two young Magicians had always shared their insights with each other. Link hadn't concealed any of his Supreme Magical Skills from Eliard, so Eliard had now managed to master the Whistle spell. His spellcasting speed was still slightly behind Link's though. Eliard could cast Whistle in 0.5 seconds, which was in fact extraordinary, but it was 0.2 seconds slower than Link.

Link examined the new spell structure Eliard had come up with and realized that although Eliard's thinking speed was still slightly inferior to his, his mind was still full of creative ideas that even he might not be able to think of. This was precisely the reason why Link had always appreciated Eliard's input and opinions.

After ten minutes of silent contemplation, Link picked up the quill pen and added two

more runes to the new structure. Then he said, "This should be perfect."

"Yes, of course!" remarked Eliard, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "That's exactly what I was trying to achieve! But I've still got some questions about..."

They then began to delve deeper into the minute details of Whistle's spell structure. They left no stone unturned and examined each tiny feature and exhausted all possible methods of modification before putting the matter to rest.

Their minds were then so completely immersed in the discussion that they were utterly oblivious to the pair of spying eyes that were peeking on them all this time.

Eleanor looked on with keen interest. Lay people might find these young men's discussion dry and boring, but a Magician like her knew that what they were talking about was far from dull.

The view provided by the Eyes of the Soul wasn't clear enough to enable her to discern the exact spell structure as laid out on the scroll, but Eleanor could still manage to make out its general characteristics based on the conversation between Link and Eliard.

She had been listening in to these young men initially out of pure curiosity. In fact, she even had a casual smile on her face and was expecting to be bored. However, as their discussion got deeper, she got more and more engrossed in them and was now fixing her whole attention on them.

It was true that they were only discussing a low-level spell, but it was obvious from their depth of knowledge and insight that these were, in fact, two highly gifted young Magicians. The sparks of ideas that they induced from one another were extraordinary and they were alive with imagination and creativity.

Imagination alone was not enough, though. After all, anyone could daydream anyway. But what was most impressive about these two Magicians was their ability to turn the concepts and ideas in their heads into real power and strength in the form of a spell modification. While their eyes were gazing up at the stars, they kept their feet firmly on the solid ground – that was the true formidable strength that these geniuses possessed!

Eleanor was actually a Master Magician, but even she was entranced by the discussion between Eliard and Link. She was now dying to find out what the spell structure of

this strange spell called Whistle actually looked like.

But that was where she was stumped by the limitations of the Eyes of the Soul. If she wanted to increase the power of the spell to make her view of Link and Eliard's room clearer, she would trigger a Mana fluctuation that might go unnoticed had she been dealing with normal people, but she was sure that these young Magicians would detect it in a heartbeat and thus her presence would be exposed.

What a remarkable place the East Cove Magic Academy is! I've just stumbled upon their two young Magicians and they turned out to be such outstanding talents! Eleanor couldn't help but sigh at the thought.

Time flew, and two hours had passed just like that. Link and Eliard had completed their modification of Whistle and were now chatting casually. At this point, Eleanor had lost interest in them as well. She was now keen to find out if the other Magicians of the East Cove Magic Academy were like these two, so she turned her spying eyes to the other rooms of the inn.

I wonder if they're all just as interesting as these two had been. Eleanor had made up her mind that it would be so.

She looked into a room inhabited by a 30-year-old Magician. He wasn't studying a magic textbook, though, but was in fact fooling around with a prostitute. Eleanor frowned and turned to another room. There were three Magicians in this room and they were sitting at a table happily engrossed in the card game of Noel's Bridge. There were gold coins on the table and rolls of cigars in their hands, while thick smoke filled the room. Eleanor withdrew immediately from the room and spied into a few other rooms, but they were all engaged in debauchery or other leisurely activities. It was as if these Magicians had flung the thoughts of magic out of their minds and were bent on enjoying themselves in the capital city.

I guess I was wrong. Those two Magicians weren't like any other people from their own academy. And so Eleanor's focus was turned back to Eliard and Link.

The two young men were staying in a suite with two bedrooms and a sitting room. They were both in the sitting room at the moment, but they were no longer chatting casually and were instead busy creating new magic gear. Strictly speaking, it was actually the young man called Link who was busy working on his new magic gear while the other one called Eliard was watching him on the side.

Link was still in high spirits and couldn't go to sleep as he was excited about the Magician's Fair tomorrow. He had some raw materials left so he decided to put them to good use and create some magic jewelry.

He was, in fact, making a necklace using the necklaces he'd seen on Earth in his previous life as a model while incorporating some of his own tweaks as well. The resulting necklace was an exquisite work of art as it was a blend of two styles – those of Earth and those of this world. But because of the time constraint, Link didn't fix any powerful spells onto the necklace, though, he did manage to attach a Level-2 Guarding Barrier on it.

Eliard had been watching him on the side with deep interest. He was impressed at Link's skills in enchantment and his craftsmanship, but he was even more intrigued by Link's perfectionism. Link was the kind of person who would rigorously control the quality of anything that he was producing and would not forgive even the slightest mistake. As a result, all of his magic gear was flawless and impeccable.

Once the necklace was completed, Eliard took it in his hands and examined every inch of it. It was made of gold and was engraved with runic patterns made of Mithril. It glinted under the candlelight, revealing the silvery sheen of the Mithril that looked like stars in the night sky. Apart from that, there was a teardrop-shaped blue crystal pendant which was glowing faintly as it was filled with Mana.

Eliard admired the necklace so much he was reluctant to put it down. Even Eleanor who was spying on them and couldn't actually see the necklace clearly but was considerably impressed. She might have lived more than a century now, but she was still a woman who loved pretty things – as evidenced by her decision to maintain her looks as an eighteen-year-old young woman.

In fact, Eleanor had no resistance against beautiful pieces of jewelry and ornamental objects. She even had the urge to rush to these young men's room right now just to take a closer look at Link's lovely necklace.

Meanwhile in the room, Link noticed Eliard's reaction to his creation and could guess what he was thinking right away.

"It would make a nice a little present for Elena, wouldn't it?" he teased Eliard.

"What? No way! Don't be ridiculous!" Eliard's face was now red with embarrassment.

He didn't expect Link to read his thoughts so accurately.

"Stop pretending, you bastard," said Link. "You take the necklace then, but don't forget to pay me with gold coins twice the value of the raw materials!"

"It's a deal." Eliard really liked the necklace. The raw materials for it cost no more than 200 gold coins, which meant that he only owed Link 400 gold coins. He knew by the quality and craftsmanship of the necklace that it could easily be sold at ten times the price of its raw material, so it was actually a pretty good deal.

Eleanor was moved by the scene she just saw. She had witnessed these two young men's staggering talents and seen their diligence, but it was the friendship between the two that impressed her the most.

They both had kind and sincere personalities and they trusted each other very much. There was a strong inexplicable bond between them that worked to improve and encourage each other.

The lonely Eleanor had never experienced a friendship with so much trust and understanding. She had always been quietly studying magic in solitude. Whenever she encountered problems in her studies, she would just roll up her sleeves and try to solve it on her own. Every time she felt sad and lonely, she'd brace herself and suffer through the loneliness as well.

She never thought that there could be someone out there in the world that she could share her thoughts and feelings with, who would read her thoughts the moment an idea crossed her mind and would encourage and support her every effort and actions.

Eleanor's Eyes of the Soul darted between the two young men and finally settled on Link.

Compared to the other Magician, the black-haired young man looked unremarkable. Still, Eleanor found him much more fascinating. In fact, he was the one who had dominated the conversations between these two. There was a certain air about him that contained strength, tenderness, serenity and wisdom, all in one person.

What would it be like to have such a friend? The thought triggered a touch of envy in Eleanor's heart.

Shortly afterwards, both young men returned to their bedrooms. Eleanor's eyes

followed Link to his room.

The sight of Link alone in his room gave Eleanor a sudden urge to go find him.

Maybe I should go find him now? she thought.

After observing Link for several hours, she felt that as long as she would talk to him nicely, he might even show her what the spell Whistle looked like, or he might even help her create new magic jewelry. He wouldn't be so rude as to refuse a lady's request, would he?

The impulse was so strong that it gripped Eleanor's heart and put her completely under its control. As she saw that Link was about to fall asleep, Eleanor gritted her teeth and halted the Eyes of the Soul and cast another secret spell – Black Raven.

Clouds of gray mist began to rise and envelop her whole body. When the mist settled, a black-plumed raven took her place and it flapped its wings, flew out of the window and headed towards Link's bedroom.

It was a surprising move on her part, but the night was long and endless and her sleep was short. She couldn't stand to do nothing while the nagging curiosity about the young Magician gnawed at her for the whole night.

Chapter 134

An Endless Night (2)

The black raven entered the room through the air vent in the window and shrouded itself in a cloud of grey mist. It then transformed into the mysterious black-dressed woman. Link was completely stunned at the sight.

Is this person here to silence me? What have I gotten myself into?

"Relax. I mean no harm," the woman said. Link could indeed feel no malice emanating from her magic aura, nor any suspicious fluctuations that may hint at a sneak attack. She did not even hold a wand in her hand.

Nonetheless, Link was still alert.

"I don't think a person who barges into my room so late at night would mean no harm."

Eleanor smiled, accentuating the alluring charm of her beautiful face. She walked to the only chair in the small bedroom and adjusted her sitting position until she was comfortable.

"Just to be safe, I was observing you the whole time; you are of no threat to me, and similarly, I do not want to cause any trouble in Hot Springs City. Furthermore, I specialize in secret magic, if I truly meant to cause you any harm, I would not even appear in front of you. What do you say?"

If they were not in Hot Springs City, Eleanor's normal procedure would be to bring Link back to her Mage Tower for interrogation before erasing his memory. That was what she had done for most of the humans she had an interest in.

However, that was not possible here. Link had a Level-6 Magician living beside him and there were many other Master Magicians roaming around town. Furthermore, Link was pretty powerful himself—she had to speak to him as though he was her equal.

Link thought for a moment before putting away his wand.

"So what business do you have here?"

Seeing that Link was reasonable, Eleanor was immediately in a good mood.

"We are all here for the Magician's Fair. Although the fair will not start until tomorrow, I would like to make some transactions with you in advance," she said.

"Oh?" Link was intrigued.

Even though Link was still wary, he maintained a calm composure and no longer displayed any signs of hostility.

Eleanor admired Link's ability to hide his emotions. She took a scroll out from her dimensional ring and said, "I have a magic scroll containing a Level-4 spell. I will give you this in exchange for your Whistle spell. What do you think?"

Exchanging a Level-1 spell for a Level-4 spell was simply a bargain under normal circumstances. However, Link was not a normal human being. If he truly wanted to learn a spell, he could simply purchase it using his Omni Points. He also had access to the complete collection of Herrera's and Anthony's magic books. The Level-4 spell thus had no value to Link, at least not as valuable as the Level-1 spell Eliard and him spent so much time and effort creating.

It was a one and only Level-1 spell that was created through their combined efforts.

Link shook his head and said, "I have no interest in exchanging them."

Eleanor was taken aback, "You should probably take a look at this. This Level-4 spell is called Psychic Shock and was enchanted with my original Supreme Magical Skills. With this spell, you can attack the spirit of all enemies within a 240 feet radius and devastate their willpower."

Link was even more unwilling now. He said, "I am not interested in such spells. By definition, this can already be considered dark magic."

In the World of Firuman, any spells that directly attacked the spirit was forbidden. This was due to the devastating side effects of those spells which could destroy a person's soul.

The death of the physical body was not something that was feared, as many believed

that their souls would finally attain peace in heaven after death. However, the destruction of the soul was different as it would destroy your existence itself, something that was way too horrific to even think about.

Link had no prejudice towards this type of magic, though, he would not personally learn them. This was due to his fear of being even exiled by Magicians of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy.

"Okay then." Eleanor put the scroll away and asked, "What do I have to offer to see the magic structure of your Whistle spell?"

Link was curious as to why Eleanor was so persistent in learning the Whistle spell. He thought for a moment and said, "Something that is unique, I guess."

"What a greedy man!" Eleanor smiled and took out another scroll.

The scroll was brown in color and was enveloped in a glorious silver hue. When Eleanor brought it out, the atmosphere in the room seemed to have stagnated. Its magic presence was so overpowering that Link immediately felt his heart and mind grow heavy, as though he were pressured by an intangible force.

"This is?" Link did not expect a scroll to have such fearsome power.

"Do you know Bryant?" Eleanor smiled with pride, much like a sly fox who had successfully baited its prey.

"Of course!" Almost all sentient beings in the world would have heard of his name. Why else would he be heralded as a Legendary Magician?

"This is the Scroll of Enlightenment that he had left behind. I can let you take a look at it in exchange for your Whistle spell," Eleanor offered.

"It's a deal!" Link agreed without any hesitation.

Eleanor was not afraid that Link would run off with her Scroll of Enlightenment. She passed the scroll to Link and held out her pristine white hands, waiting for Link to pass the magic scroll containing his Whistle spell.

Link handed over the scroll and opened the Scroll of Enlightenment almost immediately. The moment the scroll was opened, it was enveloped in a bright light and

an intricate array of rune formations could be seen. The rune formation was formed from many shining light spheres, and each of the spheres was then formed by another complex set of runes.

Link's attention was drawn to the shadows formed by the spheres. To be exact, they weren't even shadows, but runic spirals that were created by chaining tens of thousands of runes into a continuous line. It was a really advanced technique.

In the game, Link merely had to click read and wait for ten seconds before obtaining a permanent stats increase. However, in the real world, he had to study and understand the scroll before he could get the benefits.

Epic quality scroll discovered, do you wish to scan and record? The in-game system asked.

"Of course! Record now!" Link ordered. This was way too complicated for him to read in a short time. He would slowly take his time with the scroll in the future.

The game system was extremely efficient. Link felt like he was in trance and after a few seconds, he could recall almost every detail in the Scroll of Enlightenment.

The moment he was done, the scroll was snatched from his hand. Eleanor said, "I only said for a while. You have already spent way too much time looking at it."

Link stared at the scroll in Eleanor's hands and said, "You're pretty lucky to find that scroll."

"Naturally. But your luck is even better. You possess the most precious gift known to mankind, and that is magic talent." Eleanor spoke with a hint of envy in her voice.

Link asked, "I heard that there is a total of six Scrolls of Enlightenment and combining the six of them will give you a Scroll of Revelation. Do you know exactly which scroll this is?"

At this moment, Eleanor was looking at the magic structure of the Whistle spell. She answered with her eyes still focused on Link's magic scroll, "You are quite knowledgeable. Yes, there are indeed six of them and mine should be the second one. If you can fully understand this scroll, your Mana Recovery speed will at least double."

However, she had only allowed him to take a quick look at the scroll, making it

impossible for him to obtain any tangible benefits. On the other hand, she managed to learn a powerful Level-1 spell. It was a good trade.

As it was a Level-1 spell, the magic structure was pretty simple. However, it contained subtle ingenuity and ground-breaking imagination; Eleanor found it extremely fascinating.

She only looked up after a full 20 minutes and said, "This is the most beautifully crafted Level-1 spell I've ever seen. It is pure, clean yet powerful. In order to repay you, I will let you have another minute on my Scroll of Enlightenment. How much you can remember then depends on your capabilities."

She then opened the scroll in front of Link. This time, Link studied the scroll carefully while verifying it with the image recorded by the game system. There were indeed no omissions, the game system captured every single detail perfectly.

It took a full three minutes before Link looked up, despite the original time limit of one minute. Eleanor looked at Link expectantly and said, "It has been three minutes. Shouldn't you give me something else in return?"

Exchanging a Level-1 spell for a Scroll of Enlightenment was an extremely good bargain. Link was in a good mood and chirped, "What do you want? I will do whatever I can to repay you."

"How about helping me craft an enchanted accessory? Something like the one you just showed your friend. The design is simply beautiful." Eleanor's eyes sparkled in anticipation.

She looked exactly like Eliard when he first saw the accessory. In fact, she looked even more excited and fanatical than him.

Link stared at Eleanor and thought, Despite her status as a Magician, the sight of intricate accessories does get her excited.

Link then recalled some certain classic jewelry designs that were popular on Earth and reprocessed them in his mind. After the design was optimized to his liking, he took out some materials and was ready to work.

"Wait a minute; please use my materials."

Eleanor placed gold, thorium and a Cat's Eye Stone in front of Link.

The Cat's Eye Stone was the best conduit for secret magic and was extremely rare. Link took a look at the stone and said, "I do not know any secret spells and I won't be able to make full use of this rare stone. I do not want to waste such a high-quality material."

Eleanor hesitated for a moment before exchanging the Cat's Eye Stone for a fire crystal. The fire crystal had a pure luster and a layer of crimson fiery flame on it. It was much higher in quality than the one he snatched from the Magician Holmes.

"How about a fire elemental spell?"

"Is Flame Blast okay?" Link asked. It would be a waste to enchant a low-level spell on such a good quality material. He had to make good use of it.

"That would be great."

"Come back in a week." Unlike low-level accessories, high-level magic equipment will take a longer time to craft.

"I am expecting great things, Link," Eleanor said with a wink.

A shroud of grey mist enveloped her. When the mist dissipated, she had once again turned into a raven, flying out through the window soon after.

After she left, the encounter felt extremely surreal to Link. A moment ago, Link had still considered her as an enemy. Now, they had already become trading partners and he even obtained the knowledge of the second Scroll of Enlightenment out of this incredibly good bargain.

If not for the spread of high-quality materials still laying in front of him, he would have thought it was all a dream.

"What a bizarre world," Link couldn't help but exclaim.

Chapter 135

The Dark Elf Infiltration

Link woke up early the next day. He had agreed to craft the black-dressed woman an accessory imbued with the Flame Blast spell. As he did not want to delay this request indefinitely, he decided to start drafting the blueprint for this accessory while he was still energetic from a good night's rest.

Ah, the black-dressed woman...Link forgot to ask for her name yesterday. After all, he was slightly nervous throughout the whole encounter.

As this accessory needed to be enchanted with a Level-4 Flame Blast spell, a bracelet would be the best choice. Rings and necklaces were often constrained by the lack of space for the carving of magic runes, making it extremely difficult to enchant high-level spells.

The accessory had a complex structure. To ensure accuracy and minimal mistakes, Link meticulously drafted the blueprint, writing down every detail instead of simply imagining it in his mind. The perfectionist side of him then slowly took over.

He was extremely particular about every magic equipment that he crafted. Not only must the details be aesthetically pleasing, the spell enchanted in the accessory must also be done to perfection, meaning it should not merely be an ordinary Flame Blast spell. He had to take into consideration its effectiveness in real combat and then modify it accordingly.

He made sure each magic equipment that he created was unique in its own way.

After some consideration, Link decided to strengthen the Flame Blast spell with a Supreme Magical Skill he had just learned.

Link had to give his all in crafting this bracelet despite it being a complimentary gift. If he had done a perfunctory job, he would have this urge to modify it even after giving it away. Link felt uncomfortable just thinking about it.

I seem to be in the final stages of my Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Link sighed.

It was 7 o'clock in the morning by the time Link was done with the blueprint. He then kept his writing materials and started washing up.

Ten minutes later, Link met up with Herrera, Eliard and Rylai at the hall.

The Blue Hermit Inn was even more crowded in the morning. Magicians were streaming in and out. Herrera had quite the reputation amongst Magicians. As many of them passed by Herrera, they would greet her with respect.

Link, Eliard and Rylai were all young Magicians. They were thus merely seen as Magician's Apprentices Herrera brought along and did not receive much attention.

After breakfast, Herrera said, "The fair will be held at Jade Street and it is just five minutes away. Let's walk over." Herrera was a veteran—she had taken part in this yearly affair at least ten times. Link and the rest naturally took her advice and followed behind her all the way to Jade Street.

The area around Jade Street was also extremely crowded due to the Magician's Fair. Most of the vendors outside were ordinary vendors or farmers who had hoped to ride on the popularity of the fair to earn some extra income. Most of the items sold by these vendors were low-quality magic materials such as silver star flowers and magic iron ore. They were simply walking around to immerse themselves in the bustling atmosphere of the fair. However, it was different for Rylai.

Rylai would often help out in the alchemy lab back in Herrera's Mage Tower. Her job included cleansing magical herbs and brewing herbal potions. Eliard would then give her some commission as the finance manager of the Mage Tower. Just this month, her work had earned her five gold coins. This job had also developed her interest in alchemy and she would conduct her own experiments every now and then.

However, she could not afford the materials sold in the Mage Tower. Her aim for this Magician's Fair was to purchase some cheap materials for her experiments.

She hopped around the different stalls and was clearly in a state of bliss. With her innocent face and three powerful Magicians as escorts, the vendors naturally offered reasonable prices. All of them looked at Rylai with interest and joy, giving her ample time to purchase what she wanted.

It wasn't long before Rylai spent all her savings. Link offered to help her carry her spoils as she skipped forward with a satisfied expression, brimming with confidence

about her experiments.

This was an extremely carefree memory for Rylai. Many years later when she already owned her own Mage Tower, she would still smile at the thought of her teenage days.

They reached Jade Street after a relaxing time shopping with Rylai.

Herrera suggested that they split up to search for what they wanted while Rylai accompanied her. Eliard and Link agreed without hesitation. It would be a waste of time if they traveled together since they were not planning to purchase the same materials.

Link passed all the magic equipment he had crafted for sale to Herrera. Herrera then gave him 6000 gold coins as his earnings in advance. With a bag full of gold coins, he started browsing through the stalls in the Magician's Fair.

Similarly, Eliard handed over 100 magic scrolls to Herrera and had over 700 gold coins to spend. This was more than sufficient to purchase low to mid-level magic materials.

Link bought a kilogram of silver from a Level-1 Magician. Just as he was about to purchase wood to craft the body of his staff, he saw a figure at the corner of his eye. Somehow, he found this person vaguely familiar.

But he had almost no acquaintances in the capital.

Link felt something was amiss and pulled his hood over his face before he followed quietly behind. As there were Magicians and magic equipment everywhere in the fair, the magic fluctuations in the air were completely indiscernible. It was impossible to distinguish the identity of the figure unless Link recognized their facial features.

The figure did not seem to notice Link. They would stop every so often to purchase some magic materials before moving forward. As Link got closer, he could discern the features more clearly. This person had brown curly hair and nearly flawless skin. From the side, he looked simply like a handsome human. However, Link was even more puzzled. He had definitely seen this person somewhere!

Who exactly is he? Link tried matching this image with the Magicians he knew in his mind.

Link had not been in contact with many Magicians. Furthermore, most of the

Magicians he knew were from the East Cove Higher Magic Academy. If he truly was from the academy, Link would have recognized him straight away.

Wait...that's the Dark Elf! His height, posture and the way his arms flailed around when he bargained. It was exactly the same as the Dark Elf named Felidia. As Link observed, he found more tell-tale signs.

His skin color was not natural. It seemed to be covered with a layer of cosmetic product. From the side, his pupils seemed brown. However, Link knew that a Magician could craft color-changing crystal lenses easily!

It was unusual for a Dark Elf to appear in the capital of the Norton Kingdom. There was no need to take such a big risk if he only wanted to purchase magic materials. There must be an ulterior motive.

Link carefully trailed behind Felidia. They walked through half a street to the central area of Jade Street. Just in front of them was the central plaza where both the human density and quality of the magic materials sold was the highest. Link even saw a vendor selling silver dragon heart blood.

The silver dragon was an extremely powerful magical creature. Its blood was usually used to create high-quality ink for the production of mid to high-level magic scrolls.

There were even people from other races mixed into the crowd. Link saw a dwarf selling a magic pistol and an earth spirit selling magic goggles. However, the one that attracted his attention the most was the group of high elves.

High Elves, a glorious race whose hometown, Dawn Island, lay across the ocean from the Norton Kingdom. They were characterized by their crystal clear purple irises, golden hair, defined facial features, slender stature and most important—exceptional magic talent. Almost every High Elf would develop some sort of magic potential. The queen of the High Elves was also a Level-9 Magician who was only one step away from the revered title of Legendary.

There were in total 15 high elves, each of them wearing exquisite and sky blue magic armor. Amongst them, there were three Magicians while the 11 of them were the famous Magic Warriors indigenous to the Dawn Island. Both the Magicians and Magic Warriors were at least Level-4 in strength, making them an extremely powerful entourage.

Beside these High Elves were a team of Warriors from the Norton Kingdom. There were around 20 of them clad in gold shining armor. They were members of the Royal Forest Guards and each of them was at least Level-3 in strength.

And in the middle of this troupe was a High Elf teenager, the reason for all these protective measures.

He was only about 18 years old, his eyes glowing with a slight lavender hue, much like a flawless amethyst. His hair was a light golden color with a glossy shine, reflecting tiny golden rays under the warm bright sun. His features were almost perfect, so much so that even the handsome Eliard paled in comparison. It was not merely an issue of facial features, but one of temperament and demeanor.

"A High Elf noble!" Link gasped. Pure Amethyst eyes coupled with flawless looks were the characteristics of a High Elf noble.

At that moment, Link also saw Felidia quickening his pace and disappearing into an alley.

The appearance of both a High Elf noble and a Dark Elf Magician raised an ominous feeling in Link's heart. A dangerous premonition sounded repeatedly in his mind.

He was just about to catch up to Felidia when he felt a pat on his shoulders. He spun around and saw the black-dressed woman he talked to last night.

"Hey it's you again! What a coincidence!" Eleanor smiled.

Link did not have the time to chat, he urgently said, "I have something I need to attend to..."

Before he could complete his sentence, he felt a slight elemental fluctuation among the indiscernible magic aura on Jade Street. This magic fluctuation was extremely well concealed. If not for Link's keen perception, he would not have been able to tell. Link's facial expression immediately turned serious.

This feeling... it's the Flame Blast spell! And it is deliberately concealed as well! This is Jade Street!

Link looked around the street. This spell was too well-hidden and no one noticed this slight fluctuation amongst the heat and festive mood of the fair. Link felt a shudder

down his spine. If this spell were to explode in the middle of this crowd, the number of casualties would be unthinkable.

However, the magic was about to be released. He didn't have the time to issue a warning!

Chapter 136

Flame Blasts in the Heart of the City!

In the heart of a busy square on Jade Street.

Prince Phillip swept his gaze across the fascinating sights all around him. There was a variety of magic materials laid out in the roadside stalls and the merchants' shouts filled the air while human Magicians dressed in vibrant robes roamed the streets.

There wouldn't be such sights to behold in the Isle of Dawn. Although the island had an area of about 500 miles, its population only consisted of less than three million High Elves, all scattered throughout the island. The island was also rich in natural resources, so its inhabitants had no need to work very hard to get their food and drinks and other necessities. This condition had made the island extraordinarily peaceful and serene.

This was all well and good if you were a life-worn, middle-aged man looking for a quiet place to settle down in. But for a young man full of life like Prince Phillip, the Isle of Dawn was nothing more than a prison.

It wasn't a surprise then, that he was infinitely grateful to escape the island for a while when he was sent to the Norton kingdom on behalf of the Isle of Dawn's royal family. He had to discuss the matters of material aid that his kingdom was going to provide the Norton kingdom as an ally in the war against the Dark Elf kingdom of Pralync.

He had some free time today, so Prince Phillip decided to take the chance to visit the Magician's Fair he heard was going on in Springs City. He saw so many things he'd never seen in the Isle of Dawn here. Although the captain of the guards, Ayrie, who was accompanying him regarded the coarse manners of the humans on the streets with disdain and contempt, Prince Phillip was instead entranced by the passion and lust for life that these people showed.

These humans went about their business with a fire in their eyes. They clearly knew what they wanted and pursued them with steely determination. This was something he admired and had never seen in the High Elves back home. All his kind ever did was repeat the lives that their ancestors had led before them day after day with so much

leisure and idleness in their lives that their fragile bones would crumble at the slightest fall.

"I like it here," said Prince Philip, his eyes shining brilliantly as he drank in the dizzying sights before him.

"Your Highness," said Ayrie, the captain of the royal guards, "I think it's time we go back. It's getting too chaotic in the streets right now."

"Let's stay for a little bit longer," said the prince who was still so intrigued by the sights and sounds of Springs City. "We've only been here for half an hour." He dreaded the thoughts of going back to the dull and stuffy palace.

While Prince Phillip was strolling the streets without a care in the world, Link, on the other hand, was sensing a very strong murderous intent in the air!

There was a very subtle fluctuation of elements in the air. If Link hadn't increased his vigilance, even he wouldn't have been able to detect the slight changes he sensed right now. Judging from the movements of the elements, he was sure that a Flame Blast was going to be detonated in a few moments!

But the atmosphere of the street was just too chaotic to pinpoint the location of the looming Flame Blast. He tried to focus all his attention on the slight elemental fluctuation he sensed, but still failed to detect its whereabouts.

In that case, all I can do now is protect myself!

Within seconds, he entered the calm and focused state of mind of spellcasting, in which the flow of time almost came to a stop and the noises of the bustling street quieted down. Even Eleanor's voice who was approaching him seemed to come from miles away. Right now, in his mind, the only thing he focused on was that vague aura that contained traces of Mana, of elements and of some sort of hidden powers. When he focused on it a little longer he began to hear whispers of the soul too.

By concentrating on this bizarre aura, Link could finally locate the source of the incoming Flame Blasts. They were not coming from the surrounding shop houses, nor were they coming from the crowds. Instead, the Flame Blasts were coming from the underground – or to be exact, their exact point of origin was the sewers underneath the fountain in the heart of the busy square!

He was sure that there wasn't just one Flame Blast, but three, and it had managed to be triggered so sneakily without causing any major Mana fluctuations because the caster had used magic scrolls and a Domingo crystal!

Yes, he was sure it was a Domingo crystal because he was very familiar with the pattern of the surge of fire elements that were stored in a Domingo crystal.

Three Flame Blasts aided by the use of the Domingo crystal detonated in the sewers right under the square grounds – that would be as dangerous as a mine buried under the ground, and its impact would level everything that was within a hundred feet flat to the ground!

There was no time for Link to do anything other than cast the defensive spell stored in his ring to protect himself. He had fixed a Level-4 Edelweiss to the ring, and it should be enough to shield him from the brunt of the force coming from the Flame Blasts.

Eleanor was still oblivious to the looming danger. She waved her lily-white hands in front of Link's eyes in an attempt to wake Link up from his apparent stupor.

"Hello, anybody there?" she teased. "What is wrong with you?"

Link had no time to explain. The explosions will reach them any second now. Right at the moment he triggered the spell Edelweiss, he reached out his arms and clasped Eleanor tightly to his chest. They weren't exactly close friends then, but Link still couldn't just watch her be consumed by the fire of the incoming Flame Blasts right in front of his eyes.

"Hey, you rascal!" she shouted. "What are you doing?" Eleanor was completely taken aback by Link's sudden movements. She had lived more than a hundred years and was never treated in such a way, least of all by a seventeen-year-old boy! She actually found it...interesting.

She had no time to come to terms with that feeling though, as the thundering explosions hit them right at that moment.

BOOMMM!!!

An explosion that rumbled the earth erupted in the heart of the square. Flames burst outward like a demon from hell, devouring and destroying everything that came in its path. At the center of the square, the Elf Guard Captain Ayrie activated a defensive

spell at the last possible moment, but instead of saving his own life, he used the shield to protect Prince Phillip.

As for the others in the square – the Warriors, the guardsmen, the merchants, even the Magicians who were passing by – all were swallowed up by the blistering flames of the explosions.

Some powerful Magicians managed to react at the very last second by casting a defensive spell around them, though none managed to do so before the flames had claimed parts of their bodies. These unfortunate people were now wailing and howling in pain.

Elemental spells contained the highest destructive power among all types of spells, and spells that utilized fire elements were the most explosive of all elemental spells. Moreover, Flame Blast was, in fact, one of the most terrifying spells among fire element spells. Right now, three consecutive Flame Blasts were detonated – the resulting power of this move would exceed even that of a Level-5 spell attack!

There was a Level-5 Magician who happened to be in the square, but he wasn't able to protect himself in the face of such an attack as it was too sudden, and it left no time between each Flame Blast. What was worse for him was his location right in the center of the explosion, so even the Level-4 defensive shield that he managed to cast just in time had lasted only half a second before it burst like a bubble and exposed the Magician to all the elements.

In other words, even a powerful Magician was only able to survive half a second longer than the others.

Because there were two rows of shop houses that blocked both sides of the street, the flames of the explosion surged against them like a powerful tide coming in to shore and it reached a hundred feet inside these buildings before it stopped. The impact of the explosions was weaker in the shop houses and the Magicians inside had time to react, so many of them did survive, but most were seriously injured and suffered terrible burns.

The terrifying flames from the explosions lasted for six long seconds. When the fire died down, the formerly boisterous street had turned eerily silent.

Dust and gravel covered the whole area and pieces of charred body parts were

scattered everywhere. The remnants of the surrounding buildings flailed flimsily as they were hit by the shockwaves. Terrible cries of pain were heard from spots further away from the point of explosion.

There were, in total, three Flame Blast explosions in those six seconds and they had completely leveled the initially lively and bustling Jade Street into a scene of hell on earth.

Surprisingly, though, in the midst of the scene of total destruction, three people managed to survive.

The first was Prince Phillip, who was enclosed in a shroud of emerald shielding. He was slumped on the ground, dumbstruck by the sheer impact of the explosions and staring blankly around him at the hellish sight of the remnants of the busy square.

The captain of the guards Ayrie, had cast a very powerful defensive spell – equivalent to a Level-6 spell – although it wasn't out of his own powers but was, in fact, from a magic gear that the queen had given him in case of emergency.

The other two survivors were Link and Eleanor. They were right at the edge of the Flame Blast's fiery tongue and were protected by Link's Level-4 Edelweiss. They were both flung 60 feet away by the shockwaves of the explosions and were hurled into a shop near the edge of the square. Apart from slight injuries and dizzy heads, they both had managed to escape practically unscathed.

As they lay on the ground in the shattered house, Link tried to get up and activate the Mana in his body. Then, aided by the additional Mana in the ring on his finger, he managed to cast a new Edelweiss around himself and Eleanor.

The use of magic gear like his own ring could speed up spellcasting, but it would also reduce the power of the spell because of the anti-magic properties of the material that made up the magic gear. Still, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages in this case.

Eleanor, on the other hand, was still shaken up by the swift and violent assaults of the Flame Blasts. She was still dumbstruck and was hiding in Link's arms, her eyes darted around uncertainly and her whole body trembled uncontrollably.

It would be unfair to say that her reactions were because she lacked courage, though. It was just a natural response of someone who had realized that she had just escaped

the claws of death by the skin of her teeth.

If she hadn't noticed Link's odd behavior just now and decided to come over and greet him, she would no doubt have ended up as some of these mangled pieces of dead bodies strewn all over the square right now.

While it might be true that she was a Level-6 Magician, she had specialized in secret spells. She was unequipped in facing sneak attacks and lacked the understanding of the effects magic spells had on the soul. Needless to say, she was practically defenseless against the Flame Blasts just now.

Link helped Eleanor up to her feet. He peeked through the gaps of the broken wall and saw an emerald-hued aura enshrouding the High Elf prince in the middle of the now empty square. Then he noticed a group of shadowy figures sneaking up on the prince. There were six of them – some of them were Magicians and the rest were Warriors. They all seemed to be humans and each of them was at Level-3 and above.

They were all heading towards the middle of the empty square – towards the High Elf prince!

They're going to kill him! Link realized. No, there's more to this. The Flame Blasts just now were aimed specifically at the High Elf prince. This must be the Dark Elves' doing. But why would they target the prince?

After a moment's thought, the motive became clear to Link.

They're trying to put a wedge in the relationship between humans and the High Elves!

In the game, the High Elves of the Isle of Dawn had always been a constant and reliable ally of the human race. When the humans and the Dark Elves declared war with each other, the High Elves sent their princess Mirda to Norton kingdom as the special envoy and had even dispatched tens of thousands of High Elf Magicians to join the army. Without the aid of the Isle of Dawn, it was impossible for the humans to face the Lord of the Deep, Nozama.

I'll never let the Dark Elves succeed! Link vowed.

Right at that moment, a notification popped up on the interface – a new mission!

Mission: Rescue

Mission Details: Firstly, save the High Elf Prince Phillip's life! Once that is achieved, investigate the parties involved in this murder attempt.

Mission Rewards: Player will receive 60 Omni Points once the High Elf prince's life is saved, then once the investigation results in a conclusive finding, player will receive a Soul Glyph.

Hmmm? That's an unusual kind of reward. Although there were questions in his mind about this strange new reward from the gaming system, Link had no time to think about it now because those humans were now closing in on Prince Phillip. What's clear as day was the fact that those dying guards around the High Elf prince couldn't possibly fight off those Assassins!

Chapter 137

It's Him!

"The human race is overwhelmed by their desires. This desire has granted them prosperity but will also cause their destruction!" This was mother's evaluation of the human race.

In the past, Prince Phillip only saw the prosperous side of human race and many times yearned for such riches and enjoyment. However, he had now experienced the destruction that came with the benefits first-hand.

In an instant, a bustling central area of the capital was assaulted by multiple explosive and lethal Flame Blast spells. This was simply insane.

Outside of the defensive barrier, the captain of the escort team who was also his best friend, had already vaporized from the high heat. The only evidence of his existence was a broken wand ten feet away. The Magic Warriors were also dead. The only role that their shining magic armor played was to keep their bodies intact under the assault of such high heat.

A Magic Warrior whose skin was completely charred and his eyes still wide open seemed to be staring at Phillip. One could easily tell the shock he suffered before his life was instantaneously incinerated by the blazing flames. He probably could not understand how such a terrible attack could have happened in the Norton Kingdom, much less during the Magician's Market.

Phillip also saw the body of a father and daughter ten feet away. The father instinctively used his body to shield his daughter the moment the spell was released. This kept the body of the little girl intact, but alas, she was still unable to escape the high temperature of the flames.

The little girl was dead, her body painted a cruel black while she curled painfully on the ground.

This apocalyptic scene was a huge blow to Phillip's soul. He perspired profusely and tears were streaming endlessly out of his eyes. He lay helplessly on the ground, too

shocked and afraid to even move a finger.

He would return to Dawn Island immediately if he was able to survive this incident. He also swore not step into the terrifying world of humanity ever again. His vision was blurred from the tears streaming down his face. However, he could still see a few figures walking towards him.

Are they here to save me? Phillip thought. The Royal Guards would probably be the first people to react to such a terrifying assault in the capital.

However, as his vision slowly recovered, Phillip was horrified to discover the exact opposite of what he had imagined.

These people deliberately covered their features and looked at him with a deathly stare. They also lowered their voices while talking to each other.

"He is not dead yet. He is hiding behind the magic barrier!"

"The barrier had already been weakened by the spell earlier. Destroy it and kill him!"

Two of the Magicians then raised their staff and two seconds later, an Ice Spear spell and a Storm of Daggers spell appeared simultaneously, charging towards the magic barrier guarding Phillip.

While Phillip's barrier was a Level-6 spell, it was released from his magic equipment and had been set to an instantaneous release mode. The defensive strength of the barrier was thus compromised to allow for faster casting time, lowering the defensive strength to that of a Level-5 defensive spell. It had already successfully defended against three Flame Blast spell. As the two Level-3 spells collided with the emerald barrier, a large number of ripples immediately appeared. It could not hold out for much longer.

"Don't idle, attack together!" a Magician hollered.

The four Warriors around him brandished their swords and surrounded the emerald barrier. Their swords were enveloped in a deadly Battle Aura as they swung towards the barrier with full force.

Prince Phillip was devastated. The only thing he could do was to grip his magic sword tightly.

He knew that it would be a futile struggle. He was merely 16 years old and a Level-2 Magic Warrior. He stood no chance against a six-man team of Level-3 opponents. He would be instantly destroyed.

As the barrier disintegrated right in front of his eyes, a thought flashed through his mind.

This attack was targeted at me. I was the one who killed my best friend and so many other innocent people.

He was overwhelmed by sadness and regret. If he had known sooner, he would have listened to his best friend's advice and stayed in the palace.

There were three other figures hiding in a rundown house at the corner of the plaza.

They were all talented Dark Elves, known widely as Constellation Assassin Alina, Level-4 genius Assassin Ainos, and Magician Felidia. They were the three musketeers of the younger generation of Dark Elves and were prodigies in their respective fields.

The trio looked at the scene through the gaps in the house. They had to confirm the death of Prince Phillip before they could leave.

"The High Elves really do have a strong magic foundation. Magic equipment that can instantaneously release a Level-6 spell! How incredible!" Felidia whispered in admiration.

Alina kept silent. Her pair of dark crimson eyes were not fixated on Prince Phillip, but were looking in another direction.

"Who is he?" Alina pointed.

A black-haired teenager emerged from the rubble. He was enveloped in a pale light. Closer inspection would reveal that the light was made up of countless tiny runes, blending and working together flawlessly. This magic aura could only be that of a Level-4 Magician.

Ainos looked over and shook his head, "I don't recognize him. Are you sure he was the one who released the Level-4 magic barrier? Perhaps it was released by magic equipment his mentor gave him."

Felidia was similarly attracted by Alina's words. He was originally relaxed and confident but he gasped the moment he saw Link.

"He is Link! I fought against him once in Red Leaves Cove—he was extremely powerful!" Felidia whispered.

Ainos was well informed about Felidia's defeat at the hands of a human Magician in Red Leaves Cove. He looked at Alina with a horrified expression, "It's him! He was the one who used the Flame Blast spell to defeat General Lund!"

"So that's the guy?" Alina had an ice-cold stare, "It seems like we are in luck. Let's finish him off while the guards are not here yet."

The Gladstone City attack was extremely well planned and executed. There were almost no mistakes in the entire process. The Death Hand successfully deceived the Norton Kingdom's Mission Intelligence, Section 3, and had complete dominance over the military intelligence. However, the human race still managed to turn the tables around eventually and even heavily injured General Lund. It was rumored that the general was so infuriated by his failure that he killed over 30 slaves within a month.

Since then, the human Magician had been a target of the Death Hand. There was no way the three of them would let him leave here alive.

Alina unsheathed her Shattered Star Sword. The sword was made completely from Khorium and had a purple hue. The sword was slender, much like a saber and was also enchanted with a high-level Sharpness spell. Coupled with Khorium's anti-magic properties and Alina's Level-5 Battle Aura, the sword could pierce through any magic barrier below Level-5.

As the barrier surrounding Prince Phillip was on the verge of breaking, Link made his move. His targets were the Assassins right beside the prince.

His staff glowed and a piercing whistling sound could immediately be heard penetrating through the atmosphere. Within a split second, six hazy light beams were flying towards the human Assassins.

The six-man team was composed of humans that were bribed by the handsome rewards promised by the Dark Elves. They were indeed a strong combination of Level-3 fighters. However, under Link's assault, all six of them were defeated in a second, with an injury the size of a fist at the back of their heads.

All in just one second. They did not have the power to even fight back.

Alina was still observing the situation inside the rundown house. This sight caused her eyelids to bat ever so slightly and stopped momentarily in her tracks. She said, "He won't be easy to take down. Feli, Ainos, we will have to go all out!"

Link was undoubtedly strong. However, Alina was fairly confident in her skills as well. Furthermore, she also had the assistance of her comrades. How could a team of a Level-5 Assassin, a Level-4 Assassin and a Level-4 Magician be defeated by merely a Level-4 Magician?

It would be preposterous.

Felidia whispered, "Be careful, he has gotten a lot stronger. My previous battle experience is probably not useful anymore."

Ainos was similarly shocked by Link's high spellcasting speed. He then unsheathed his second dagger and revealed the silver crossbow he had hidden all this time. He was prepared to use his full strength.

"Attack!" Alina was the first to rush out of the house. The moment she left, she immediately activated her skill, Deception Spiral.

With the help of her Battle Aura, her movement speed became incredibly fast. As she advanced, multiple shadows of her seemed to appear—it was impossible to distinguish between the real and fake copies.

This was the best way to deal with a Magician who was currently in a state of extreme focus!

Chapter 138

Who's in Real Danger Here?

Amidst the ruins of the square, in the heart of the street.

The swordswoman Alina chose the best timing to make her move.

At that moment, the human Magician had just killed off the hired human Assassins. This was the moment that the Magician would let down his guard, or at least it was the moment when his reaction time would be the slowest.

She was now about 130 feet away from the Magician. With the help of one of her Battle Art skills, Deception Spiral, she would only need 1.5 seconds to cross this distance!

In 1.5 seconds, Link would be within her reach. Then all she needed to do was smash the Magician's defensive spell apart and decapitate him – all with a single swing of her sword!

Yes, she was a Level-5 Assassin so there was no reason she couldn't do it! More importantly, she was not alone—he had two strong comrades behind her as well.

Just as Alina rushed forward, the Level-4 Assassin Ainos came out of hiding and instantly raised his arm and took aim. In that hand was a crossbow that was radiating a cold silvery Battle Aura.

Click.

The arrow was now in place, and the magic seal on the crossbow was now activated. At the same time, Ainos had stabilized his aim and locked it on Link's skull.

Whoosh!

For a moment, there was a sudden burst of light that was blindingly bright. Then, an arrow that looked like a silver thunderbolt emerged from it, tearing through the air at a frightening speed towards Link's head.

This crossbow contained anti-magic powers. At the instant of firing, it would also be boosted by the power of a Level-3 spell, which gave it extreme penetrative force. Even if it couldn't completely break through Link's defensive shield, it was sure to weaken it by a considerable amount, so Alina would only have to touch it with the tip of her sword to completely smash the shield.

Once the arrow was fired, the bright magic crystal on the silver crossbow dimmed slightly – it was now recharging. The process would take a while, so Ainos would have to wait three seconds before he could fire the next arrow.

At the same time, the Magician Felidia finally stood up.

He made no move to attack, though. He began, instead, to cast a defensive spell.

Of the three Dark Elves present, he was the only to have fought against Link before. He was familiar with this Magician's tactics and strategies and he was confident that the combined forces of the three of them would be able to defeat him. Still, they must be prepared to protect themselves with a shield, otherwise the last counterattack from Link before he died might kill at least one or two of them.

That was why they decided that Alina and Ainos would be the ones to attack the human Magician and he would provide them both with the protection of his defensive spells – it was a fail-proof fighting strategy.

About 0.8 seconds later, Felidia used the magic bracelet on his arm to cast a halo spell – Dark Fog!

Dark Fog

Level-3 Halo Spell

Range of Effect: 260 feet.

Effects: Specified targets within the range will be shrouded in a thick protective grayish fog which will decrease the power of a Level-3 spell attack by 60%.

(Note: The higher the level of the spell, the weaker the protection, e.g. the power of an attack from a Level-4 spell would only be decreased by 50%.)

Although the defensive spell was only Level-3, it was more than sufficient to protect

Alina because she'd only left a window of 1.5 seconds for the opponent to cast another spell. With such a brief period of time, the most powerful spell the Magician could possibly cast was a Level-3 spell. Even if he could cast a Level-4 spell, its power would still be halved by Dark Fog and Alina's own Battle Aura would no doubt protect her from it. There was no reason to doubt that she would be able to counter any kind of attack this Magician would hurl at her!

Within seconds, Alina was now less than fifty feet away from Link. She used her Battle Art to blur her silhouette, making it harder for the Magician to aim his attacks as it was now impossible to pinpoint her exact location.

"No!!!" shouted Prince Phillip helplessly.

The human Magician who had just rescued him minutes ago was now in grave danger and he didn't even have the power to do anything about it!

While he was screaming, the Assassin Ainos' silver arrow managed to pierce through Link's Level-4 Edelweiss. The tip of the crossbow arrow was in direct contact with an opposing force as it penetrated the force field; it emitted a shimmery silver light as its speed was gradually impeded. It looked just like a fish that had jumped into a pool of thick gel.

At last, when the arrow had penetrated the shield for about one and a half feet and only a few inches away from Link's forehead, it was deflected away by the force field. However, the Edelweiss had indeed received some damage because of this attack. The light that had enveloped Link's body was now so dim that it was almost invisible. All it needed was for Alina to poke the shield gently with her sword and Link would be rendered completely defenseless.

Eleanor had noticed just how much danger Link was in as well now. Naturally she wanted to rescue the young Magician who'd just saved her life seeing that he was about to get killed. But she had underestimated the three Dark Elves' formidable power!

Eleanor wanted to cast a defensive spell on Link and protect him, but she instantly realized that there would only be less than half a second of time for her to cast it. By the time she was done casting the spell, the Dark Elf's sword would've cut him down from ear to ear.

In other words, in the face of such rapid attacks, Eleanor, the Master Magician who had been exploiting the mysterious features of secret spells for sneak attacks for a century was now powerless against the Dark Elves. She could do nothing but watch her friend get killed in front of her eyes.

The Dark Elves' battle strategy was like bolts of lightning that would bombard you with attack after attack without giving you time to react. In this case, even if you had the capability to cast a thousand different clever spells, you'd still be defeated as you wouldn't have the time to cast them.

It was not unlike the strategy that Link and Herrera used to knock the old Necromancer Shade to the ground and defeat him at the black Mage Tower.

Eleanor now realized the cruel truth of how it was impossible for her to help Link now. She couldn't understand why, but she suddenly felt a sharp pang in her heart. Finally, after more than a century of utter isolation and loneliness, she'd found a friend in Link. Yet in the blink of an eye, death would soon claim her only friend – why must life be so cruel and tragic?

No one could save Link now, that much was clear to Eleanor. The only person left that Link could rely on was himself!

Fortunately, Link turned out to be as reliable as any other help he could get. In fact, he had been brewing up a strategy the moment he saw the Dark Elf swordswoman appear.

The woman was nimble and agile; she was adept at concealing her movements and her speed was swift. It would be difficult to hit her with a spell that had high penetrative power like Whistle, as it would require Link to hit the target accurately. She was also protected by a defensive spell and possessed strong Battle Aura herself as well so any Level-0 spell, even Link's Glass Orbs, would be useless on her.

Moreover, even if he could hit the Dark Elf accurately with his spells, she would be able to block those attacks with her sword anyway. He also had so little time that he couldn't afford to make even the smallest of mistakes, so he would have to give up attacking her with any spell that worked in a small target area.

Which meant that he had one option left – his second strongest spell, Flame Blast.

Mana began to flow into his wand and reconfigure into the spell structure of Flame

Blast. The fire elements stored inside the Domingo crystal would be a great help to him now as it would save him the time it took for elements to collect and condense at the tip of the wand.

Thus, within one second, a Flame Blast began to take form at the tip of Link's wand. Alina was roughly 30 feet away from Link by then, and she could even clearly make out the roiling heated air around the fireball. An ominous sense of danger overwhelmed her senses and her pupils shrunk to the size of a pinprick.

At this moment, two options stood before her. Firstly, she could retreat and save her life, or secondly, she could fight on until the last drop of her blood was drained from her veins.

A Warrior retreating before a Magician? That would be more shameful than death. The right choice was clear to her now – she would grit her teeth and fight till her last breath!

Flame Blasts were indeed powerful and there was no doubt that it was her three consecutive Flame Blasts that had turned the square in the heart of the city into a hell on earth. Still, Alina had the powerful defensive spell that Felidia had cast on her body and besides, she possessed a formidable Level-5 Battle Aura. More importantly, she was now only 30 feet away from the opponent. If Link decided to unleash a Flame Blast here, he would no doubt be burnt to a crisp himself!

The fire element was a wild and explosive element to control. While high-level fire spells were undoubtedly fearsome weapons in battles, they were also like double-edged swords that could equally hurt the opponent and the caster!

"Bring it on!" shouted Alina.

She unleashed a burst of Battle Aura which materialized as silver spikes around her body. The bright silvery glint that emanated from her body followed her as she dashed forward at high speed, leaving a trail of faint aura behind her. She looked just like a shooting star falling from the sky.

Unfortunately, she had yet again underestimated Link's true powers.

In truth, Link had another choice. He could use the Legendary spell to transport himself to a spot faraway and escape the attacks virtually unscathed. He could even bring Prince Phillip and Eleanor with him because the Legendary spell was able to

transport more than one person. Despite this choice being available to him, Link nevertheless chose to fight head-on with Flame Blast – because he had enough faith in himself and was confident that he would thwart the Dark Elves' plans!

In fact, he wouldn't just thwart their plans, he would also defeat them all!

Chapter 139

Instantaneously Routed!

Within one second, the Flame Blast spell took form!

Link released the spell without any hesitation. The spell would land around 15 feet in front of him. Closer inspection would reveal that this Flame Blast spell was slightly different from the ordinary one. It was still wrapped in the same deadly flames, but the magic fluctuation was much more stable. This stable form caused the resulting spell to look just like a translucent light dome.

The fireball landed after 0.1 seconds and caused a huge explosion. At the same time, Alina was still 25 feet away.

Boom! The earth-shattering sound reverberated throughout the street as the incandescent flames started emerging. Then, a stunning thing happened.

The spell did not erupt in all directions, but instead charged only in the direction opposite of Link in a conical formation. The explosion seemed to be obstructed by an unknown force on Link's side. The dancing flames were constrained into a perfect semi-circular arch around him.

Supreme Magic Skill: Single Directional Explosion!

This was an upgrade to the Flame Blast spell Link had been working on.

The translucent light dome surrounding the fireball was not merely a more stable version of the flame, but also a binding field. When the Flame Blast spell exploded, Link could then control the eventual shape of the explosion, containing the explosion to a single directional outburst.

As a result, Link would not be affected by the damaging effects of the spell, while Alina had to bear the full offensive power of the explosion.

What was more frightening was the concentration of power in Link's Flame Blast spell. Even though the spell had been contained by the force field, there was no change in

the total offensive power of the explosion. Since it was unable to explode with full power in all directions, all the oppressed deadly fire elements would be compressed towards Alina!

The Flame Blast spell now had a power that was almost Level-5 in strength!

In an instant, Alina felt like she was engulfed in a lava waterfall while she struggled to travel upstream against the torrential current.

Not only was there an endless stream of flame, there were also rubbles and pieces of charred flesh washed up by the force of the spell.

"It's not possible to break through!" Alina made the judgment in an instant and sidestepped, dodging the attack. She escaped the blazing furnace in 0.2 seconds.

However, within those 0.2 seconds while she was in the lava pool, the black mist protecting her was completely shattered and her Battle Aura disintegrated. Her cloak with anti-magic properties was also vaporized, the anti-magic pebbles in the cloak breaking into pieces. Her protective mask was also drenched in blood as a piece of rubble had hit her right in the forehead.

At the same time, she heard a cry of despair behind her. She spun around and saw Ainos being engulfed by the blazing flames 60 feet away.

Ainos' reaction speed and defensive power were not as fast as Alina's. Although the offensive power of the Flame Blast spell had already weakened after spreading out over 60 feet, its surface area was five times larger.

As a result, Ainos did not manage to escape the deadly assault. Following which, Felidia was also affected by this attack.

Felidia was positioned in a much better location. He had enough time to hide behind a broken wall and was much further away from the attack. Hence, he only suffered minor injuries.

However, this was not all. Alina once again felt the violent fluctuations of fire elementals. From the corner of her eyes, she saw a new Flame Blast spell taking form at the tip of Link's staff.

Supreme Magic Skill: Link's machine gun!

Under the effect of magic resonance, the new Flame Blast spell formed almost instantaneously. Due to the three Flame Blast spells fired by the Dark Elves previously, the air was concentrated with fire elementals, this hence catalyzed the spellcasting speed of fire elemental spells. Alina estimated that the Flame Blast spell would be fully formed in 0.5 seconds.

How can his spellcasting speed be so fast! Alina was horrified. This was a Level-4 spell and not some simple Level-0 child's play. It did not make sense!

She only had around one-tenth of her Battle Aura left. It would not be enough for her to escape; her only choice was to fight to the death. Fighting to the death was merely a saying to boost her confidence. To be exact, it should be a futile desperate attempt. Perhaps she indeed had a slight chance of winning, however, it was way too slim. What happened in the next moment completely shattered the final hope present in Alina's heart.

When she once again charged towards Link, she felt an incomprehensible and irrepressible fear in her heart. The fear was so intense that she turned back involuntarily after only charging forward two steps—she had to leave this terrifying place.

Alina had a strong soul and was able to maintain her sense of reason even when she was struck by extreme fear. She quickly knew that this was not due to her fear of Link, but because of the effects of some sinister spell!

Some distance away, a black-dressed woman was staring at her coldly, her hands holding a purple staff enveloped in a sinister dark purple glow—it was Eleanor. Due to the time constraints, she could only use a Level-3 spell, The Heart of Fear.

The Heart of Fear

Level-3 Secret Spell

Effect: Cause the target to be in a state of fear. Seriously inflicted individuals will lose control of their body and scream involuntarily. May cause death from the breakdown of the soul.

(Note: The more strong-willed the person, the weaker the spell)

Alina was a tenacious woman. She recovered from the spell in less than 0.5 seconds

and continued her advance towards Link.

However, Link's Flame Blast spell was already fully formed and Alina stood no chance. The only reason she continued her assault was due to her pride and glory as a swordsman.

Even if I must die, I will die fighting and not while on the run! Am I going to die? Alina sighed. She could already feel the blanket of death coming over her—it was scalding hot.

At this moment, Alina was suddenly pulled back by a strong force. She realized that everything around her was moving further and further away, creating distance between Link and herself.

Following which, Felidia's voice rang in her head, "Alina, run, go as far as you can!"

This was Felidia's spell: High-Level Vector Throw

High-Level Vector Throw

Level-2 spell

Effect: The upgraded version of Vector Throw. User is able to throw a stone weighing half a ton at the speed of 150 feet per second.

Alina did not weigh more than 200 pounds even with the additional weight of all the equipment. The effect of this spell was strong. She flew through the air at a speed of 240 feet per second.

While she was still in mid-air, she saw Link release the Flame Blast spell towards Felidia.

A blinding flash and deafening blast echoed through the street. The flames still advanced in a cone formation, engulfing Felidia's hiding spot in flames. The next moment, the magic aura surrounding her disappeared.

Felidia was dead.

At the same time, she heard a sharp whistling sound. Her acute senses told her that danger was imminent. Alina saw two small objects flying towards her at high speed.

She gasped, "This guy wants to exterminate us!"

Alina finally got the chance to reveal her skills as a swordsman. Brandishing her Shattered Star sword, she dished out 13 slashes in a second, forming a visible net of air ripples in front of her.

The collision of the Whistle spell and Alina's defensive stance caused metal fragments and flames to burst in many different directions. This debris was mostly blocked by Alina's fast reaction and her armor.

However, there were still some that slipped through the cracks and penetrated deep into her thighs and arms. Alina immediately felt a sharp pain shot through her body.

Fortunately, her body had landed safely in an alley 300 feet away. With all the houses surrounding her, she was out of her opponent's field of vision.

The moment she landed, she ignored the injuries on her body and rushed into a house. Following which, she jumped out of a back window onto the streets and deftly maneuvered herself around the streets, quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Alina did not know how to describe her feelings.

Felidia, Ainos and herself were termed as the Three Musketeers of the Silver Moon. For this assassination mission, they were not only the main engineer, but also the main execution members.

To hold such great power when they were merely teenagers was a testament to their strength. They felt like the whole world could be trampled under their feet in due time.

However, they were utterly defeated when the three of them attempted to fight this human Magician. Ainos and Felidia were already dead while she was fleeing in panic. All her confidence and pride were completely shattered by the human Magician called Link.

How can there be someone this horrifying? His spellcasting speed was insane! How do I even explain this situation to the queen? Can I escape from Hot Springs City safely?

Worrying thoughts continued to bubble in Alina's mind. She could not help but be in fear. She was like a dog who had lost its home, desperately running from the dangers of the outside world without any direction.

Chapter 140

Your Highness, Are You Retreating Already?

The gentle breeze carried the scorching air left behind by the Flame Blast. Link stood in the middle of all the rubble as he stared into the direction of Alina's escape. He wanted to chase her down, but soon changed his mind.

Alina possessed a Battle Aura of at least Level-5; her speed was lightning fast and Springs City was a labyrinth of narrow alleys where she could easily weasel through and make her escape. Even if Link did try to chase her down, he might end up being the one who got ambushed instead.

He wasn't sure he could face a Level-5 swordswoman's ambush right now.

Capturing her wasn't the most important thing anyway. He must now focus on ensuring the safety of Prince Phillip. It might look like he won now, but there was no guarantee that there wouldn't be any more Dark Elves lurking around trying to attack the High Elf prince.

With this thought in mind, Link turned around and approached the prince.

Eleanor subconsciously followed him. For no other reason than the fact that those two Flame Blasts Link had just detonated were immensely powerful and they had completely toppled her first impression of the young black-haired Magician.

When she first met him yesterday, Link was, in her eyes, a gifted young Magician with very quick spellcasting and exceptional enchantment skills. He was warm and friendly, while at the same time wise and sensible. There was a hint of awkwardness about him, but all in all he was an amiable young man.

But just now, when they were suddenly attacked, Link had reacted calmly and quickly which had saved her life. He even went on to kill six Level-3 professional Warriors at an amazingly quick speed. Then, when he was surrounded by three even more dangerous opponents, Link managed to keep his calm and killed two of them and force the remaining one to flee without even moving a step.

This kind of combat power was simply terrifying!

Eleanor imagined herself in Link's situation and thought that if she were to face such dire circumstances, she'd probably die at least twice.

Although she was well-versed in secret spells and was in fact a Master Magician, all these spells she'd learned would be totally insufficient to make her last even a fraction of a second in a violent battle.

In this battle against the Dark Elves, another side of the young Magician was revealed to her – that cold, resolute and dangerous side, and it had left a much more profound and lasting impression on her mind than what she thought of Link when she first met him.

She had followed him for a few steps before she forcefully pulled herself back and shook her head gently, incredulous of the young man's influence on her.

She was also a master of spirituality, so naturally she understood the reason behind this influence she felt.

He's planted a deep impression on my heart now, thought Elena after a deep sigh. I'm afraid I won't be able to be strong in front of him after this.

She knew that she could never reach Link's level of magic skills, or his wild and bursting energy, or his single-minded determination. The only way she could free herself from Link's influence was to defeat him in a battle with exactly the same tactics as Link had used just now. But that was near impossible, so Eleanor had no choice but to concede to this new influence that she'd never experienced before.

She then turned to the corpses of the two Assassins on the ground nearby. They had been charred to the bones, but because their armor was made of very good materials, their bodies were still held in their original position where they fell dead. These people had almost killed her, so she must get to the bottom of their identities and motives.

Within the first few seconds Eleanor had noticed that both corpses had dark purple blood.

"Dark Elves!" exclaimed Eleanor in shock.

News of the massacre in Gladstone had spread throughout the continent and Eleanor was well aware of it as well. She'd never thought that they would be so bold to sneak into the capital city and create such a raucous here. There was no doubt now that the enmity between the kingdoms of Norton and Pralync would only be solidified and radicalized from this point onward.

Since you're both Dark Elves, I'll just go ahead and use the spell on you with no hesitation then. Eleanor would've paused if they had been human Magicians because of the impacts her spell would have on the souls of the dead, but now that she found out that they were the sworn enemies of humankind, she went on swiftly without any qualms.

She chose to cast the spell on the Magician's corpse. Eleanor waved her wand gently and a gleam of purple light that looked like a pair of phantom hands emerged from its tip. Those hands searched the corpse and reached inside it, where they pulled out a bright orb of white light.

Soul-Searcher

Level-4 Secret Spell

Effects: Obtains a large amount of information about the life history of a person who hasn't been dead for more than three hours.

(Note: This is a taboo spell as it has a great destructive power to the target's soul.)

Without considering the damage that the spell might have inflicted on the unfortunate Felidia's soul, Eleanor grabbed the light orb in her left hand and forced it into the magic golden ring on her finger.

After that, Eleanor could sense a pair of eyes watching her from behind, so she turned around and saw Link's shocked gaze at the sight of her dark magic spell, although he made no attempt to come and stop her.

Eleanor then smiled awkwardly at Link. She knew for some reason that he wouldn't interfere. Seeing that Link made no move a few seconds later, her smile widened, and she slowly stepped back and headed towards the shambles of rubbles and mostly destroyed buildings. Soon, she disappeared into the narrow alleys without a trace.

The city guards would soon arrive, and they would not like the look of a mysterious

Magician using dark magic. She had no choice but to bolt before they could catch her. She was enraged by these Dark Elves who had almost taken her life. Although she was glad that two of them had been killed, there was still that swordswoman who ran away like a coward. She swore by the honor of a Master Magician that she would use her magic skills to hunt that woman down.

Meanwhile, Link turned around and headed towards Prince Phillip. By then, the young prince's eyes were blurred by tears and he was dazed and confused by everything that had just happened. When he heard the approaching footsteps, he raised his head and saw Link. He looked into the Magician's eyes with respect and gratitude.

"Master Magician, thank you for saving me," said the prince, his tone full of reverence and awe, though he still sounded awfully formal.

He was grateful to be alive, but this incident was a rude awakening of the cruelty in the human world. His previous fascination for this world was now violently shattered. All he wanted now was to go back to his homeland, back to the safety and serenity that he had known all his life.

The Isle of Dawn was all that was on his mind now.

"Your Highness," said Link unexpectedly, "have you been frightened by the cruel reality of this world after what has happened?"

"I beg your pardon?" replied the prince, not knowing how else to respond to such a puzzling question.

Link then knelt down in front of Prince Phillip and stared straight into the prince's violet eyes.

"Your Highness," he began earnestly, "there is a vast golden savannah in the southern part of the continent where lions rule as the kings of the grasslands. They lived in prides, and in each pride, there will always be just one adult male lion. This alpha male is the strongest of the pride and rules over the other lions and the other beasts of the grasslands."

Prince Phillip didn't exactly know where Link was going with this, but he was fascinated by his words and was listening to him intently.

Then, Link reached out his hand and patted the thin and fragile shoulder of the young

prince before he continued.

"But did you know, my prince," he said, "that every male lion would be driven out of the warmth and safety of their prides by their fathers before they reached adulthood? They would be forced to make it alone in the world, where they might get bullied by the dogs, or they might be forced to eat rotten flesh to survive, or they might get stampeded by the elephants or the rhinos. In fact, some even died before they became a mature male lion. Only when they'd passed all these trials were they able to return to their pride and defeat the alpha male and reclaim their position. Your Highness, you are now just like the lion who'd just left the safety of his pride – are you planning to retreat already?"

Prince Phillip was moved by these words. Was he going to run away so soon? Yes, that was the thought he had just now – he was going to return to the peaceful and idle life he'd always lead in the Isle of Dawn and he planned to live out the rest of his life in safety and leisure.

But the Isle of Dawn was only a small part of the world, and the High Elves were only one of the many races that lived on the continent. While an ordinary High Elf might choose to live out his life in the peaceful world of the Isle of Dawn, he was a member of the Amethyst royal family, and a prince of the High Elves.

A prince couldn't expect to have the admiration and respect of the people if he didn't honor his responsibilities to protect them and bring glory to the royal family – that was his duty as the prince of the kingdom.

And so, the prince wiped away his tears as he stared at the Magician who seemed to be the same age as he was.

"I thank you again for saving my life," said Prince Phillip solemnly. "The High Elves will forever remember this valiant and noble deed of yours! May I know your name, sir?"

These words had proven that Prince Phillip was no longer the terrified boy he was just moments ago and was now ready to step up to claim his authority and honor as the prince of the High Elves.

"My name is Link Morani, Your Highness," answered Link with a smile. "I am a Magician from the East Cove Higher Magic Academy."

"I am Phillip Rodrick," said the prince, "the third son of the Queen of the Isle of Dawn."

Link extended his hand to Prince Phillip, who then held on to it as Link helped him up to his feet again.

This was the portentous moment that was recorded in the history books of the Firuman continent. It was the exact moment that had consolidated the foundation for the glorious alliance between the humans and the High Elves which proved to be one of the most crucial elements that would help the Realm of Light to fend off the Dark Side in the future.

Chapter 141

Anthony You Are Too Damn Lucky!

Central Plaza

...

"Link, are you alright?" A worried but familiar voice rang in Link's ears. When he spun around, he saw Herrera rushing over with a group of Magicians. Eliard and Rylai were also amongst the first few people who reached the incident site.

The destruction caused by the three Flame Blast spells was devastating, creating a hell-like scene. It had also alarmed the entire Hot Springs City. Herrera and the rest were only the first groups of people rushing to the site. Behind them were the Mission Intelligence, Section 3, the Royal Guards and the Royal Battle Magicians, all making their way to the central plaza at top speed.

This incident was way too horrifying. The situation was getting more chaotic as more people arrived. Link stayed vigilant while staying right beside Prince Phillip to prevent any more tragedies from happening. The sight of Herrera and his friends unharmed calmed him down slightly, "I am fine. However, a lot of people are injured. Prince Phillip also requires attention and help."

Herrera's attention was then diverted to the High Elf beside Link. From her accumulation of wisdom, she could more or less infer the cause and motive of the attack. This was definitely a planned murder of a Royal High Elf on the side of the Silver Moon!

She immediately turned and told Eliard, "The situation is pretty serious. Bring Rylai back to the inn to pack up, and leave for East Cove Higher Magic Academy."

The situation was beyond the powers of Eliard and Rylai. If they continued to stay in the capital, they would only become Herrera's source of worry and distract her from the investigation. Link, on the other hand, had once fought beside her and even played a crucial role in the Battle of Mist Basin. She had already considered him a fellow comrade.

"What about you?" Eliard's heart sank. He knew the situation was grave.

"The incident has way too many implications. The kingdom might require my assistance." Herrera was prepared. She was a master of the East Cove Higher Magic Academy and was known by name in the royal kingdom. She was even accorded the title of a Duchess. She naturally had to stay and offer her assistance in the face of such a tragedy.

"Alright." Eliard held Rylai's hand and left the plaza ruins hastily.

As he left, his eyes swept across the plaza ruins. There were two clear lines of impact on the ground and in the middle of those traces were two complete bodies. They were one of the few bodies that managed to remain intact through the incident.

When Eliard first saw the signs, he did not think much about it. However, it hit him after a while.

That was a controlled outburst of energy. It should be the work of Link...has he already reached that level?

Link basically stayed in the academy this whole time, communicating with Eliard over their recent magic discoveries. Eliard had of course heard some rumors of Link's strength but thought nothing of it. However, now that he had seen the aftermath of Link's battle, he was hit with the realization of Link's true power. While they were around the same age, Link had already surpassed him in many aspects, probably even in ways far beyond his imagination.

Eliard quickened his pace at this thought. He could feel the gap widening and had no time to waste. He had to speed up his progress or he would end up chasing after Link's shadow indefinitely.

The ruins had attracted a crowd. Many of them had a look of horror on their faces, stunned by the image right in front of their eyes.

"Who would be crazy enough to do this?"

"Oh my, this is Wand Master Hermira!" Someone had found the corpse of the well-known Enchanter.

"This is...Master Dallas!" Another person recognized the identity of a Level-5

Magician.

Dallas was a wind elemental Magician from the Southern Magician Alliance. He was probably here to join in on the fun of the festival. Little did he know that he would lose his life on such a joyous occasion. The future was truly unpredictable.

People who were around the edges of the attack were still alive but suffered injuries. As they were treated, screams of pain could be heard echoing through the street.

Herrera joined forces with Link to protect the prince and she held her staff out in alert. Two minutes later, the Royal Guards arrived together with a Royal Magician, an acquaintance of Herrera.

"Master Grinth, you have arrived," Herrera greeted.

Grinth was a Level-6 Master Magician. He was 58 years old and his hair had turned white. He had a serious expression and his wrinkles seemed as though they were carved onto his face by a sharp knife.

He scanned across the central plaza. When he saw Herrera and Link together with Prince Phillip, he heaved a sigh of relief.

An explosion in the most crowded area of the capital was an unprecedented tragedy. If the prince of the High Elves were to be affected by this incident, it would be a disaster!

It was thus fortunate that the prince was alive and not injured.

Grinth then commanded the Royal Guards beside him, "You, form a team to treat the injured. You guys each bring a team to maintain order."

The guards immediately dispersed to execute their own duties. After giving some instructions to his assistant, he quickly walked towards Prince Phillip. Grinth immediately bowed and apologized for the trauma caused upon reaching the prince. He then looked Herrera and asked, "Moirra, what exactly happened here?"

Grinth and Anthony were best friends. As Herrera was Anthony's favorite disciple, Grinth was naturally on good terms with her. Furthermore, not only was she the strongest Magician in the area, she was also standing right beside Prince Phillip when he arrived. It seemed only natural to ask her for information.

However, he had inquired the wrong person this time. Herrera pushed Link forward and said, "I do not have first-hand experience of the situation. This is my disciple Link. When the explosion happened, he was nearby. He is also the one who saved the prince."

Grinth then diverted his attention to Link. He saw a black-haired teenager with a very vague magic aura (Link was concealing his aura) and he was not more than 20 years of age. His heart was immediately filled with a little contempt. Out of respect for Herrera, he said, "Tell me exactly what happened here."

Grinth was a senior in magic. Naturally, Link greeted him with respect before recounting the incident in detail. Finally, he pointed to the two corpses lying in the trails of his spell and said, "There were three Dark Elves involved. One of them ran away while the other two were killed by me. It was an emergency and I did not have the liberty to control my strength. Hence, I was unable to keep them as captives."

Grinth was extremely surprised. Firstly, he was surprised at the Dark Elves involvement in this assault. Secondly, he was both impressed and shocked by Link's battle abilities.

Grinth was not idling while he listened to Link's recount. His sights were set on the plaza ruins and he managed to get a rough understanding of the situation that unfolded. There were six human bodies with a huge open wound on their heads and no burnt injuries. Link claimed that they were assassins which Prince Phillip confirmed.

From their equipment, Grinth could determine that the six of them were at least Level-3 in strength. If Link had used a spell that covered a large area to kill all of them at once, he would not be this surprised. However, Link had chosen to cast six individual low-level spells. From what he had observed, the six assassins were defeated before they even got the chance to react.

What impressive spellcasting speed! Grinth gasped.

He also saw two huge burnt fan-shaped trails which were more than 90 feet in length. From the remnant elemental energy, he could tell that it was a Level-4 spell.

According to Link, he was ambushed by three Dark Elves at that point in time.

To be able to cast two consecutive Level-4 spells in the midst of an ambush—what

kind of skill does that take? Grinth was dumbfounded. As he listened, he carefully observed the young man standing in front of him.

He looks extremely young and is clad in a grey magic robe. He is holding a wand in his hand...? A Domingo crystal! What exquisite workmanship! Such a unique rune arrangement...is this an Epic wand? Why have I not heard of it before?

The most important equipment to a Magician was the wand. An Epic wand would thus definitely be well-known amongst Magicians. However, this was Grinth's first time seeing this wand. There could only be one explanation which was that the wand was newly crafted.

Anthony kept bragging that there was a genius in the academy who had achieved Level-4 despite his young age. He also mentioned his unimaginable magic talent. Is this the guy?

Originally, he simply dismissed the idea as preposterous.

He had always believed the young man was merely talented. His tender age would suggest that his experience with and understanding of magic was nowhere near satisfactory. However, the battle scene had proved him wrong. The details had proven that this young man was a lot stronger than people of his age. Many of his skills appeared to be original as well, so much so that Grinth was not able to comprehend the battle scene completely.

Anthony is too damn lucky! If it was me, I would have also crafted an Epic wand for him! Grinth could not help but be envious.

If Grinth had known that the wand was created by Link, there was no telling how impressed he would be.

Chapter 142

The Gift from the High Elf Prince

Although he was very much surprised at Link's revelations, Grinth's mind was calm. That was usually the case for a powerful Magician like him; he didn't show any of his emotions on his face.

After listening to Link, he turned towards the corpses behind him and noticed the dark purple blood on them. This was an irrefutable characteristic of Dark Elves and taking Link's detailed explanation into account, there was no doubt that the calamity was the Dark Elves' doing.

"Ira," shouted Grinth, calling for his assistant, "bring a team of guards here immediately and go get us a carriage! Make it quick!" Fear had begun to creep up on him now.

Once his assistant was gone, he then turned towards Herrera.

"Moir, it's not safe here," he said. "We must escort the prince back to the royal palace and...I suppose your disciple should come along as well."

Grinth had fully acknowledged Link's strength by now. He would be glad to have him with the company as they escorted the prince back to the palace as he could act as an excellent guard. Moreover, this young man was the direct witness of the attempted assassination and had even saved the prince's life. Grinth was sure that the king would like to meet such an important figure when he heard of the details of the incident.

To this request, Herrera and Link naturally agreed.

Soon, the carriage stopped at the edge of the ruins of the street. Grinth's people surrounded Prince Phillip and escorted him into the carriage and they headed straight to the palace.

The guards then surrounded the carriage all along the journey as Prince Phillip, Herrera, Grinth and Link sat inside. For extra protection, Grinth had cast a powerful Level-6 defense spell around them as well.

They then traveled all the way to the palace without any incident. As they entered the palace gates, a notification popped up on the interface.

Mission: Rescue (First Step Completed).

Player received 60 Omni Points.

Mission's Second Step: Exposing the Dark Curtain, Current Progress $\frac{2}{3}$.

The reward for the second part of the mission was the mysterious Glyph of Soul. He checked his current progress and discovered that he would've received the anticipated reward had he killed the third Dark Elf. It's a pity the swordswoman managed to escape.

There should be more chances to pursue her later, thought Link, as a way to comfort himself. I've done my best and it's too late to catch up with her now, anyway.

After arriving at the palace, the security guards were taken over by the heavily armored members of the king's guard. Grinth disappeared into one of the many buildings in the palace complex to arrange the royal security affairs. Link and Herrera, on the other hand, were lead to a sitting room in the palace. Grinth had mentioned that the king might want to meet them.

Soon after settling down in the sitting room, a messenger came in to inform them of King Leon's order, though it had nothing to do with Link but was instead an order for the reputed Magician Herrera to join the Royal Council. As an unknown young Magician, Link would have to wait a little longer, alone in the sitting room.

And so, Link was left there all alone in the vast empty room. It seemed as if everyone had forgotten his presence there. Still, Link was above letting such thoughts bother him. He waited there patiently, giving no thoughts to the apparent disregard the courtiers had shown to his reputation.

He clearly understood that only people who had gained the king's utmost trust and confidence could join the Royal Council at this time of emergency. The members of this esteemed council had the highest capabilities, qualifications and reliability. While it might be true that he had shown exceptional capabilities so far, he had still risen too quickly and had basically no established position in society. He hadn't even met the king himself, so it would be impossible for Link to gain the king's trust at the moment.

As he was starting to get bored waiting, he took out his sketches of the Flame Blast enchantment bracelets and began to work on them.

It was intended for the black-dressed woman. Although they hadn't exchanged more than a few words between them and Link didn't even know her name at this point—the woman had even used a taboo dark magic spell in front of him not too long ago—he still wanted to fulfill the promise that he had given to her.

Never mind, he thought. I'll just keep my distance from her from now on.

Flame Blast was a Level-4 spell. In order to fix it to a bracelet he must create a bracelet with an intricate structure and pattern. This wasn't a simple task at all, so Link was quickly immersed in the planning that forgot the flow of time.

Just as he was engrossed in his work on the sketch, Link suddenly heard a sound of soft footsteps beside him. When he turned his gaze towards the source of the sound, he saw Prince Phillip standing not too far away, staring at him.

Prince Phillip was only an insignificant minor character in the game because Link had never even encountered him in his previous life. This might be because the gaming company ignored him, as he played no important roles in the main plot of the game. Or maybe, it was just not his time to shine yet. Anyway, Link's impression of the prince was completely blank before he met him today.

In reality though, this person was a high-born royal prince of the Isle of Dawn, so Link hurriedly bowed when he noticed him in the room and addressed him respectfully as "Your Highness".

As he bowed, Link began to find the prince's presence there a bit strange. Link was only a normal Magician now and he was only a younger son of a minor Viscount. Their disparities in rank were huge, so there was no reason for the prince to come find him here himself. Link had assumed that after he was escorted safely back to the palace, the mission would be over and they would have nothing more to do with each other. So what was the prince doing here?

When Link turned around, he saw a hint of guilt on Prince Phillip's near-perfect face.

"I'm sorry," said the prince, "have I disturbed you?"

"Oh, not at all, Your Highness," answered Link with a smile. "I am an enchantment

Magician and I was merely working on my sketches for my next magic gear since I had nothing else to do here. Did you come to see me?"

Phillip nodded and glanced at the sketch in Link's hand as he approached him. The sketch was elaborate and was full of complicated parts and indecipherable magic runes. He couldn't understand a thing on the sketch so he turned his gaze back to Link.

"I am deeply indebted to you, sir," said the prince. "You've saved my life."

"Your Highness," said Link, "I only did what I should've done." Link had estimated that the High Elf prince must have some important business to come and meet him here himself. Although he was curious to find out what the prince's motives were, he posed no direct questions to him and opted to wait patiently for the prince to bring it up himself instead.

Sure enough, Prince Philip shook his head in reply to Link's modest protest and soon revealed his true reason for this meeting.

"Since you've done what you should, then I must do what I should as well," said the prince. "A simple thank you won't be sufficient in expressing my gratitude to you."

As he finished his sentence, the High Elf prince then took out a delicate little wooden box with a greenish-brown hue. Its outer layer was carved into beautiful patterns of trees and flowers. The prince then thrust the box into Link's hands.

"Here," said Prince Phillip, "it's my gift to you."

The wooden box was the work of a famous carving master among the elves, but that was beside the point. What was most important was the contents of the box. He had no idea what use this object had or what its specialty was, but it was what the Prophet had given Prince Phillip.

The Prophet was a mysterious figure who had originated from the human world. He held a lofty position in the High Elf court and was even respected and revered by the Queen of the Isle of Dawn herself.

Prince Phillip remembered the Prophet's last instruction before he left very clearly.

"The contents of the box are of no use to High Elves," he said, "but it is of immense value to a human being. I'll give this box to you now, so you can give it to the right

person when you are in the human kingdom."

"How do I know I've met the right person to give this to?" the prince remembered asking the Prophet.

"If you think the person is the right one, then that is the one you give this to," answered the Prophet. "Just listen to your heart, my prince."

In fact, besides discussing the alliance between the two kingdoms, Prince Phillip had come to the Norton Kingdom expressly for this purpose. The answer given to his question about the right person was vague and confusing, and the prince wasn't sure if he fully understood it. He had been carefully observing many people these days yet none of them had struck him as the right person to give the Prophet's gift to.

If they didn't even make him feel like they were the right person, Prince Phillip assumed that they must not be the right one. That was why the wooden box stayed with him until this moment.

But right now, the prince felt confident that Link was the most suitable and worthiest person to receive the mysterious gift, which was why he snuck out of his room to meet him.

Link had no idea there was so much meaning behind the gift. He thought nothing of what the contents of the box could be. All he thought was that it was a normal gift given to him as a token of gratitude, which he humbly accepted.

"Thank you, Your Highness," he said courteously as he received the wooden box with both of his hands.

"I don't know what else to give you," said the prince with a friendly smile. "But apart from this wooden box, you will now receive the friendship of the High Elves. You'll forever be my honored guest on the Isle of Dawn and you'll always be welcomed there."

"I shall never forget it," replied Link.

"I snuck out just to meet you," said Prince Phillip, "so think it's time for me to go back now before they realize I'm gone. Farewell, Link." As he waved his hand, the prince quickly turned around and went out of the room.

The meeting with Prince Phillip had happened so quickly and seemed to be a bolt out of the blue for Link. When the prince was gone, he began to examine the fist-sized wooden box in his hand, eager to find out what was inside it.

Is it jewelry? Or maybe a type of precious magic material? Link was just about to open the box when suddenly, there were footsteps at the door. Link didn't want anyone else to know of Prince Phillip's gift to him, so he quickly hid it inside his storage pendant.

Not long afterwards, there was a voice calling for him at the doorway.

"Mr. Link, his majesty would like to meet you."

Chapter 143

Time to Mature

The Parliament hall of King Leon.

While Link was waiting in the lounge, King Leon, Duke Abel, Grinth, Herrera and the head of Military Intelligence, Section 3 had all arrived at the parliament hall.

Everyone had a grim look on their faces, especially the head of MI3, Duke Stan. His expression was so gloomy it looked like someone splashed ink on his face.

When Gladstone City was suddenly ambushed and almost taken by the Death Hand, he had already lost much of his reputation and prestige. This time, the Death Hand was once again a step faster than him and successfully assaulted the capital in the middle of a festival. As the military chief of MI3, he was ashamed.

"My lord, I will resign as the head of MI3 as punishment for my incompetence." He broke the silence.

King Leon was usually a reasonable and calm person. However, this time, he was infuriated and lost his usual graceful demeanor.

"Shut up! You will have to leave, but not before you settle the mess you created!"

The hall fell into silence once again. Everyone knew that the king was truly furious.

If word got out that an attack of such scale happened in the capital of the Norton Kingdom during a Magician's Fair, their reputation would go down the drain. The Norton Kingdom would then become the laughingstock of the entire Firuman Continent.

Putting the embarrassing issues aside, they started discussing steps to recover from this assault. They had to give a reasonable explanation to the people of Hot Springs City and assure them that the capital was still safe. If they failed to give the citizens assurance, their insecurities might once again be used by the enemy to plan for an attack of an even larger scale.

Fortunately, there was ample evidence pointing towards the Dark Elves as the culprits. Two Dark Elven corpses were left at the scene, justifying that hypothesis.

"This is already the second time; those red-eyed vampires are going overboard!

"At least Gladstone City was on the borders. To think that they had the courage to infiltrate all the way into the capital and deliver such a cruel blow to the human race! We have to fight back!"

"Your majesty, it is time!"

"But we are not ready."

"You can never be fully ready for a war. The Dark Elves will not wait for us."

A heated discussion ensued in the hall. After a while, they came to a conclusion that revenge against the Dark Elves had to be taken.

King Leon kept silent the entire time, listening intently to the discussion. When a conclusion was reached, he took a deep breath before instructing his assistant, "Stan, I want the Dark Elf who escaped to be captured alive. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" This incident had completely ruined Duke Stan's reputation. If he let this Dark Elf escape once again, he would not even have the face to stand in front of his ancestors

"Areve, this Dark Elf seems quite strong. We will probably need some professionals. You will work with Stan!"

"I understand!" Areve patted his chest armor. He was also embarrassed by this incident. The twenty guards that he picked were completely wiped out by the Flame Blast spell assault. They were all elite soldiers that he handpicked for this mission. To think that they were done in before they could do anything.

"We will also have to catalyze the war in the North; we will have our revenge!" King Leon said.

They desperately needed a victory. Only a victory could fully appease the people's hatred towards the Dark Elves.

It was Duke Abel's turn to speak. Abel was the King's brother and was 38 years old, 10

years younger than King Leon. He was energetic and charismatic, making him a good leader. He was also a Level-5 Warrior and currently the general of the Kingdom.

He stood up and gave a cruel smile. "Your majesty, you will attain a glorious victory."

"I hope so." King Leon nodded.

His brother was cruel and ruthless. King Leon was still able to control Abel ten years ago, however, Abel just got more ambitious every year. Just recently, Abel had begun to challenge his orders. King Leon was actually looking for a chance to weaken Abel's military authority in the kingdom but the occurrence of such a tragic incident left him no choice but to put off this plan to a later date.

They then proceeded with the discussion of other issues such as reparations to the people, appeasing Prince Phillip, stocking up enough food, the preparations for war and so on, not missing out on a single detail.

In the end, everyone was assigned a task and left to execute them immediately. King Leon turned towards Herrera only after the last person left the room and said, "I heard that your disciple Link was the reason Prince Phillip is still alive. I would like to meet him if it is possible."

The servant then went to summon Link to the parliament hall.

In the meantime, King Leon continued, "Master Moira, tell me about this disciple of yours, what kind of person is he?"

King Leon had actually already read the report on Link given to him by Duke Stan and had an understanding of Link's achievements. However, he should not judge a person merely from the information he gleaned from the report, even if it was assembled by the head of the Kingdom Intelligence Agency. It was wise to seek a second opinion.

Herrera stood up and greeted the king before saying, "Your Majesty, in my eyes, my disciple is a perfect Magician."

King Leon was slightly taken aback before smiling, "Perfect? That is an extremely high appraisal."

He spoke again after a short pause, "I always knew that he had a rare talent battling with magic, but I never expected him to be this powerful. I have plans to confer him

the title of Commander of the Magicians' troop in the North. Do you think he has what it takes?"

Herrera fell silent for a moment before shaking her head, "Your Majesty, he is still young and his power still needs some time to mature. Furthermore, Magicians his age are often rebellious and dislike authority. I feel that he is still unsuitable."

King Leon mused, "Indeed, I was too impatient."

He was not making an empty promise. An incident indeed happened in the North some time ago. When the Magicians' troop fought against the Dark Elf Magicians in a minor conflict, the Kingdom's Magicians suffered a slight loss.

His niece Annie then wrote him a strength assessment report for both forces. With a total score of ten points, the Norton Kingdom Magician troop would at most score six points on the scale, while the Dark Elves scored an eight.

The strength of the Magicians' troop was often the deciding factor in a war between nations. If their Magicians' troop was indeed lacking in strength, they would likely lose in an official battle as well.

As they were still not in an official war, there was time to make amendments. Leon had been desperately trying to recruit Magicians with combat experience, so much so that he watered down the restrictions present in the Norton Kingdom Constitution. Even the vagabond Magicians who only knew a few spells were also paid royalties if they were willing to enlist.

Link's actions in Gladstone City turned the tables around and allowed the Norton Kingdom to achieve victory. His performance on Jade Street was even more amazing; he defeated three strong opponents. Furthermore, he was from the East Cove Higher Magic Academy, making him an officially recognized Magician. This was exactly the person they were looking for.

On the other hand, what Herrera said also made sense. After thinking for a moment, King Leon let go of the idea.

This man was destined to be a towering tree, a pillar of support for the human race. However, he was merely a small sapling at this moment. Although he already seemed to be tall and strong enough, he was definitely lacking in experience. He should be allowed to mature for a longer period of time.

However, he had already decided to make good use of him. It was time for him to get into his good books.

At that moment, the servant brought Link into the parliament hall.

Chapter 144

The King's Rewards

In the game, King Leon was about forty years old. He had a lean face, a head of gray hair and a gentle nature. Garbed in his luxurious royal garments, he was just the perfect picture of a gentleman.

He was also a wise king no matter which point of view one could judge him from. Although he had the rotten luck of being the king of Norton when it fell to the Dark Side.

"I have never committed any sins or made any grave mistakes, yet why is my kingdom falling into the abyss while it's in my hands?" Those were his last words.

He didn't live to see the day when the Kingdom of Norton collapsed completely. On the eve of the collapse, he was killed by his most beloved niece, Princess Annie who had by then gone mad. Not only was his head cut off, even his soul was sucked into an evil demon device that was in Annie's hands, imprisoning him even in his afterlife.

Because of this, he held the first spot in Firuman's top three most tragic figures.

But right now, none of these events had happened yet. When Link saw the king, he thought he looked just like the king in the game, but with some crucial differences. Because he met the tragic king a year earlier from the main timeline in the game, he didn't have that much gray hair on his head and his wise eyes had not yet been darkened by despair and frustration.

"Your Majesty," said Link in a humble tone. He took a deep bow and performed a ceremonial gesture that a Magician would do to another Magician of a higher rank.

"Take a seat," said the king as he waved his hand. Servants in the throne room then led Link to his designated seat.

King Leon waited for Link to settle down as he looked on with a gentle smile on his face.

"Annie has been telling me about you," he said. "To be frank, I was a bit skeptical when she told me about how you saved her life and the whole city during the massacre in Gladstone. But now that I've heard of what happened here today, I finally believe everything she said about you."

The court Magicians have already divulged everything that transpired in the square of Jade Street to the king – everything from what spells were used and the details of what went on in the battle were revealed to him with nothing left out.

King Leon could make out from the reports that there was indeed a very powerful Magician at the scene—a Magician so powerful that only a few others in this kingdom could rival his strength. In fact, he might be the only one with these kinds of capabilities right now because the other Magicians were academic scholars. They were obsessed with abstract pursuits like discovering the true nature of reality and the world and thought fighting in battles should be left to the crude Warriors.

That was the reason why the Battle Mages in the army were usually those of average skills and limited knowledge and who knew that they had no future in academia. In addition, they were born into families having low status. These Magicians were looked down upon by the scholarly Magicians and because of that, these Battle Mages would usually hold themselves in low regard as well.

He would be surprised to find another Magician like Link in the kingdom, someone who possessed high talent and battle skills and who had a promising future in academia if he chose to go down that path.

In this regard, the king estimated that the Dark Elf Kingdom of Pralync would also be facing the same problems, though probably not as serious as the Norton Kingdom.

Because of this, King Leon had planned to assign Link to the battlefield in the North as the commander of the Magic Legion in the army.

Meanwhile, Link was still unclear of the reason why the king had summoned him. Thus he decided to respond with utmost courtesy and humility, just to be safe.

"Your Majesty," said Link, "I only did what duty and honor compelled me to do."

"It is just as you said," nodded King Leon, "you did what duty and honor compelled you to do, and so I shall do the same. Alder!"

Then, a white-haired scholar walked in slowly, holding a thick book in his hand as he approached the king reverently. He flipped the book open and placed it on the reading table next to the throne.

The eagle-eyed Link noticed that the book was titled The Land Records of the Kingdom. His heart began to beat faster as he realized what the book title would entail, though he managed to keep a calm facade.

The reason was simple – in the Kingdom of Norton, whenever the king was presented with the book, it meant that the king was about to reward someone with a piece of land!

Link was about to receive his own piece of land!

In the game, he was already a Level-7 Magician and had climbed up through the ranks to become the commander of a legion in the army before he was rewarded with his own land. Although it was only a small piece of land with an area of about ten miles, he had received enormous profits from it, plus everyone who inhabited the land would address him as my lord and bow to him whenever they met him. He'd even had young and beautiful maids working in his residence. All in all, it was simply a blessed life to be a landowner.

The king sat on the throne as he flipped through the book quietly. He stopped after flipping more than a couple pages into the book and turned his gaze back to Link.

"There's a wasteland called Ferde Wilderness southeast of the Girvent Forest. The land there is poor and infertile, the climate is insufferable with its constant harsh winds. No one wanted to have anything to do with this piece of land, but if you like, this wasteland with a radius of more than a hundred miles will be yours."

Herrera couldn't hold in her thoughts any longer, so she stood up the minute the king finished his sentence.

"Your Majesty," she said, "please pardon my effrontery, but how could you reward such a desolate land to someone who had made a genuine contribution?"

Herrera had been so happy to see that the king was going to reward Link with land. She knew that such rewards were only given to the best of men, especially to those who had made an exceptional contribution to the military. Link had rescued the city of Gladstone – that could be considered as a great military contribution.

And since the king had decided to reward Link for his achievements, shouldn't he be given something decent instead of this ghastly place with no profitable value like the Ferde Wilderness?

The Ferde Wilderness was an infamous desolate wasteland in the Norton Kingdom. Although it was connected to the sea in the east, the sea there was full of jagged reefs which made it an unsuitable site for commercial ports or even small ordinary docks. There would be at least three large-scale hurricanes coming in from the sea every year, and the squalls there could lift a grown man off his feet and carry him off. Needless to say, the soil there was so infertile that even weeds wouldn't grow on it, let alone crops. Although its area was vast, the population there consisted of no more than 5000 people, and all of them had to eke out a living in very poor conditions.

In fact, even robbers, bandits and fugitives who had little choice for the places they could go were reluctant to go there. Only those who were extremely vicious and extremely desperate ended up in the terrible place.

King Leon shrugged and stretched out his hands in a gesture of helplessness in response to Herrera's protest.

"I'm afraid the other pieces of land are already owned by someone else," said the king. "And the rest is either too small or is under too much dispute. So what do you think, Link? If you're unwilling to accept this reward, I can give you gold coins instead. Maybe I can give you ten thousand gold coins and award you the title of Baron, how about that?"

This was his original intention, of course. Link was just too young and his position in society was still unestablished. Though he did make some great contributions to the kingdom, if he was to be rewarded with a piece of land that many coveted, it might elicit hatred and jealousy among his courtiers and bring unnecessary troubles to Link as well.

The king had only offered the land to show him that there was the possibility of being handsomely rewarded if he continued to help the kingdom.

In fact, his real idea was to offer Link a barren land that nobody wanted so he would reject it, and then he would reward him with gold coins instead. This was the plan that the king had in mind, and it was one that he had employed many times before.

Link was amused at how this reward from the king had turned into something that sounded more like a bargain in the market. He had to hold in his laugh, though.

As for the Ferde Wilderness, he knew from the game that it was indeed barren and lifeless. It was, after all, called one of the three worst places in Firuman. Players who were rewarded with this piece of land after their service in the army were all so frustrated that many of them even deleted their accounts because of it.

That was until one player accidentally discovered that the black clay in this territory developed an exceptional anti-magic property when baked into bricks. This player then sold the bricks and made a vast fortune from it. He even made it into the list of top thirty richest players in the gaming system, with the nickname of 'the King of Bricks'.

Furthermore, the area of the land awarded to that player didn't exceed 10 square miles anyway. But now the king was offering a piece of land that was hundreds of miles wide to him – it was simply a deal he couldn't refuse!

Once he'd made enough money from the bricks, he would then use magic spells to change the squally climate of the Ferde Wilderness to make it more temperate. Who knew, maybe in ten years he could turn the Ferde Wilderness into the Ferde Farm!

However, even though Link was eager to accept the reward, he concealed the excitement and carefully chose the right words to ask the king another question.

"Your Majesty," he said, "may I ask what status I will have as the owner of this land?"

King Leon was stunned upon hearing this question. He didn't think that Link would accept this worthless piece of land. He gave it some considerations and finally came to a decision. Since he wanted this desert-like wasteland so much, then he would grant the young Magician's wish and give it to him.

"You're a cunning young man," said the king, laughing. "You wouldn't own the land as a commoner, of course. How would you like it if I make you a Baron?"

"I would be honored, Your Majesty," said Link. "May I ask if the land and title would be hereditary?"

What a greedy young man, thought King Leon, his eyes widened. While it was true that Link had indeed made a great contribution, but it was far from enough to be worth

such a big reward. He'd only offered the title and the land to show his generosity and to encourage the young man to keep up his good work. He never thought that Link would turn out to be so greedy. Who would've thought that land and title would not be good enough for him, and that he would be so bold as to demand them to be hereditary?

Still, things had come to the point where King Leon had no choice but to concede to the demand. No one wanted the wasteland that was the Ferde Wilderness, anyway. Plus, there was no way to create any income or value out of the land. So even if there was honor in the title of Baron, the rewards were little more than a sham once everything was considered.

"Yes, of course," said the king. "Your land and title will be hereditary, so you can pass it on to your future son and he will pass it on to your grandson and so on. Are you satisfied now?"

Link was about to answer the king when Herrera tugged on his sleeve to stop him.

"Link," she whispered, "don't you think it's better to choose the gold coins over the title? That piece of land would only be a burden to you. No amount of magic could transform it into anything close to profitable!"

She was only trying to help Link make the best decision for his own good. No matter how she considered it, it seemed to her that Link was choosing the less favorable option here.

Still, Link's reply to her well-meant advice was a gentle shake of his head.

"Gold coins don't last very long," he whispered. "I'd much prefer a land of my own."

"Your Majesty," said Link enthusiastically as he stood up, "thank you very much for your rewards. I am very pleased and honored to be the recipient of your generosity."

"I'm glad you like it," said King Leon, laughing. At that moment Link was only a naive young nobleman who hadn't seen much of the world in the king's eyes. He might be exceptionally gifted in the area of magic, but he seemed to have very limited knowledge of practical matters—one could even say that he came off as slightly ignorant in worldly affairs.

Of course, owning land was a good thing, but it also depended on the kind of land you

owned and its location too. With a place like the Ferde Wilderness in your possession, you might as well have owned nothing.

But this wasn't necessarily a bad thing, either. King Leon liked to have such a talented and capable Magician who was so easy to control under his wing. One never knew how they might come in handy one day.

"It's all settled, then," said the king. "You should return to the academy for now. I will send the letter of declaration and title deed to you soon. As for the awarding ceremony, I'll let you know when I've found a good auspicious day for it."

Since Link was only awarded the title of Baron, there wouldn't be much involved and only the two people present here right now were enough to make the awarding ceremony valid.

"Your Majesty," said Link as he raised to his feet, "I am forever indebted to your generosity."

"It is only my way of encouraging you, young man," replied the King as he nodded gently. "I hope that one day you will be the pride of the kingdom."

These were general words of encouragement that King Leon had said to every young man he'd seen some potential in. In fact, he'd said it so many times before that they were almost a mechanical reflex instead of heartfelt. Nevertheless, whenever he looked back on this precise moment in the future when the Norton Kingdom's safety was in jeopardy, his heart was filled with gratitude.

He thanked his past self for making such a wise investment.



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